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COLLECTED WORKS: SUDA51
チームニンジャの「仁王」
TEAM NINJA'S NIOH
三宅優が語る
「ドラクエの魅力」
YU MIYAKE ON THE MAGIC
OF DRAGON QUEST
ニーア オートマタ
NIER: AUTOMATA
プラチナゲームズ開発のオープンワールド・アクションRPG大公開
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RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD
#301
JANUARY 2017



To be alive playing games beneath cherry blossoms

When we laid out every cover in **Edge**'s history for issue 300, even we were surprised to see the extent to which Japanese games, technology and people have dominated our attention over the years. Partly that's because in recent times we've seen Japan's place on videogaming's worldwide stage diminish, and our expectations have lowered all round. Even the mighty Nintendo's lustre feels a bit tarnished nowadays.



Exclusive subscriber edition

But *Mega Man* creator Keiji Inafune was wrong in 2009 when he said that Japan's game industry was "finished". It has shifted, but it's been a process of fading, not crashing. Wii U limped out of the gate and never recovered, but PS4 emerged as a steamroller, crushing a Microsoft that suddenly looked completely unlike the company that had just bossed a console generation with Xbox 360. The sales charts this Christmas may be dominated by console games made in the west, but the majority of them will be played on technology from Japan. The biggest-selling VR hardware will have a Sony badge, too, despite PSVR being later to the party than its western-designed competitors. Japanese consumers may no longer care so much for traditional console gaming, but we haven't fallen out of love yet.

Even if it was willing to try, Japan may not be able to produce something to stand alongside genre behemoths such as *Overwatch* or *Battlefield 1*, which have gobbled up so much playtime in 2016, but that's OK. It has always been distinguished by its game creators' appetite for risks – and the availability of publishers unafraid of bankrolling them. Sometimes these risks are mechanical innovations, but equally we look to Japan for themes, characters and stories we haven't seen anywhere else – as with this issue's cover game, which follows on from the intimately human *Nier* with a yarn centred on a female-gendered android named 2B and her robotic allies. Naturally, it's a project directed by a man who insists on wearing a grinning, mad-eyed mask during press interviews. We meet Taro Yoko and his team for a tour of *Nier: Automata* on p56.

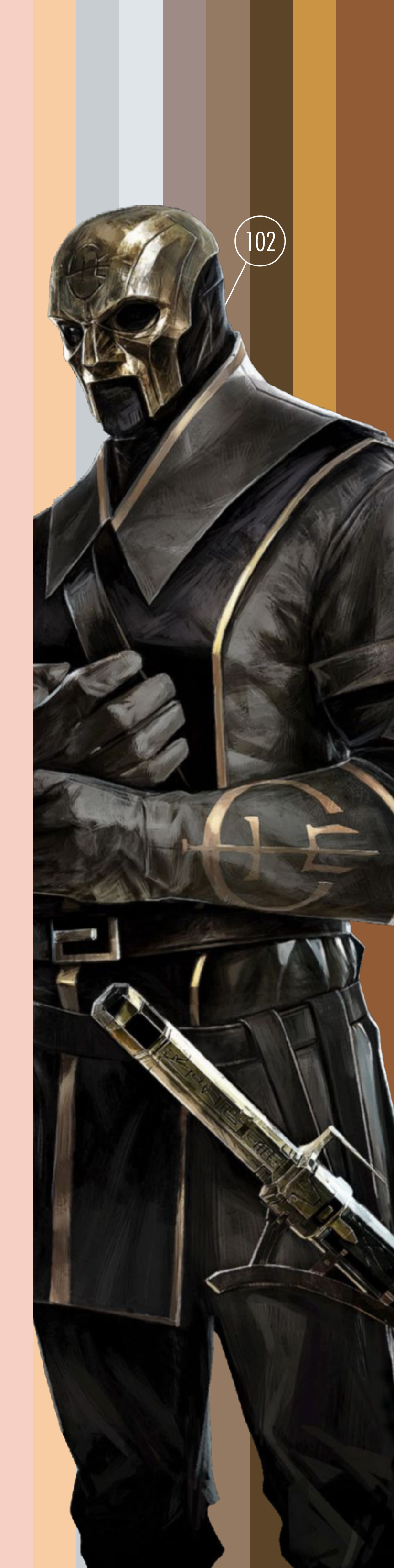


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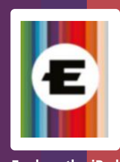
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Specialist Magazine Of The Year



Pro evolution

Sony's upgraded PS4 delivers on its 4K promise, but not without issues that complicate the bigger picture

During its opening week on sale in November, 65,194 PlayStation 4 Pro consoles were sold in Japan. Given that the traditional version of Sony's hardware often sells fewer than half of that number on a good week, this was a successful launch in a territory that has cooled on consoles in recent years, preferring mobile gaming nowadays. It's easy to imagine Sony execs being pleased with the numbers – until they saw Nintendo's Famicom Mini shift over a quarter of a million units through its launch weekend. The scale of Nintendo's success proves that Japanese consumers still have the capacity to go wild over new hardware launches – even when they're not really 'new' at all – but it takes something from leftfield to ignite the touchpaper. In comparison, PlayStation 4 Pro is safe, a studied advancement of a proven success, not some dinky curio.

The hardware itself is the bulkiest PlayStation console since the original PS3, but not nearly as distinctive in its design, its wedge-style appearance seeing it sit comfortably alongside the recently introduced slim PS4. In use, its UI and OS behave just like those of a standard unit – crucial given Sony's eagerness to emphasise that all PS4 software will work across all devices in the family. The Pro hardware doesn't feel particularly exciting, in fact, until you hook it up to a screen that will do it justice – and, of course, feed it with some PS4 games re-engineered to show it off.

At launch, however, the simple act of connecting the console to 4K TVs has presented problems in itself, with a number of owners of LG-branded units reporting HDCP issues that resulted in black screens upon powering up their new consoles. Workarounds were soon shared among users online, and LG reps moved quickly to assure consumers that a firmware fix was in the pipe. But the existence of such a problem helped to illustrate how Sony's hardware upgrade clouds the fundamental concept of the videogame console, whose appeal



One of the key distinguishing Pro features is its central control bar, which is clicked at either end to power up the console or remove discs. Somewhat counterintuitively, the clickable section directly below the disc slot is assigned to power rather than disc ejection

versus PCs has always been founded on simplicity and accessibility. It's just one entry on a surprisingly long list.

Clearly the introduction of PS4 Pro has made game-makers' lives more complicated, too. With Sony allowing developers to choose how to upgrade their games for resolutions in excess of 1080p, there is no such thing as a standard Pro enhancement. *Hitman*, for instance, provides a 1440p image on Pro, along with framerate enhancements. *Tomb Raider*, meanwhile, uses checkerboard rendering to achieve 2160p if you select 4K mode. *Watch Dogs 2* clocks in at 1800p via checkerboard rendering, while *Ratchet & Clank* achieves 2160p with what developer Insomniac calls 'temporal injection'. Then there are games that fluctuate between resolutions during play, such as *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, (scaling between 1800p and 2160p) and *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (1560p and 2160p). To round things off, there are outliers rendering 4K natively, notable examples including *FIFA 17*, *Skyrim: Special Edition* and *Rez Infinite*. If you don't have a 4K TV, depending on the game you're playing you may be offered alternative 1080p modes, with framerate optimisation trading off against higher-detail images, or simply an all-round improved base version, supersampling a higher-resolution image to offer increased detail levels while also reducing aliasing.

There would be more native 4K games had Sony been able to squeeze more processing power into the Pro package, but that was never going to happen at its £349 pricepoint. Importantly, though, the disparity between 1440p and 2160p isn't as big a deal in reality as it seems on paper: on a 55-inch 4K panel, the Pro version of *Hitman* offers clinically clean-looking imagery that contrasts well against the original build. The benefits of higher resolutions obviously come into their ▶

FRAME GAMES

To everyone who's been asking developers to focus on framerate upgrades to existing PS4 games rather than spending that extra horsepower purely on higher-resolution images: they've been listening. On PS4 Pro, *Hitman* can be played with its framerate unlocked, allowing it to reach into the region of 50fps, with a similar option available in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*. Sucker Punch's *Infamous* games also allow image detail to be traded off against increased framerates, the heightened fluidity adding considerably to the experience of flowing through the game's open spaces. Playing a game in Pro mode doesn't always result in smoother performance, however. Tech analysis site Digital Foundry has been applying its microscope to Sony's new console since its release, and has reported that various Pro patches result in framerates that are occasionally inferior to those of the standard PS4 iterations. At the time of writing, culprits include *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, *The Last Of Us: Remastered* and *Watch Dogs 2*. Sony has acknowledged the issues, and is likely to scrutinise framerate issues more closely for forthcoming Pro builds across the board.



Some PS4 Pro visual overhauls fare better than others, even from within the same publisher. At the suboptimal end of the spectrum is *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, which renders certain UI elements at native 4K while applying rough-and-ready upscaling elsewhere. The messy results were immediately pounced upon and shared online

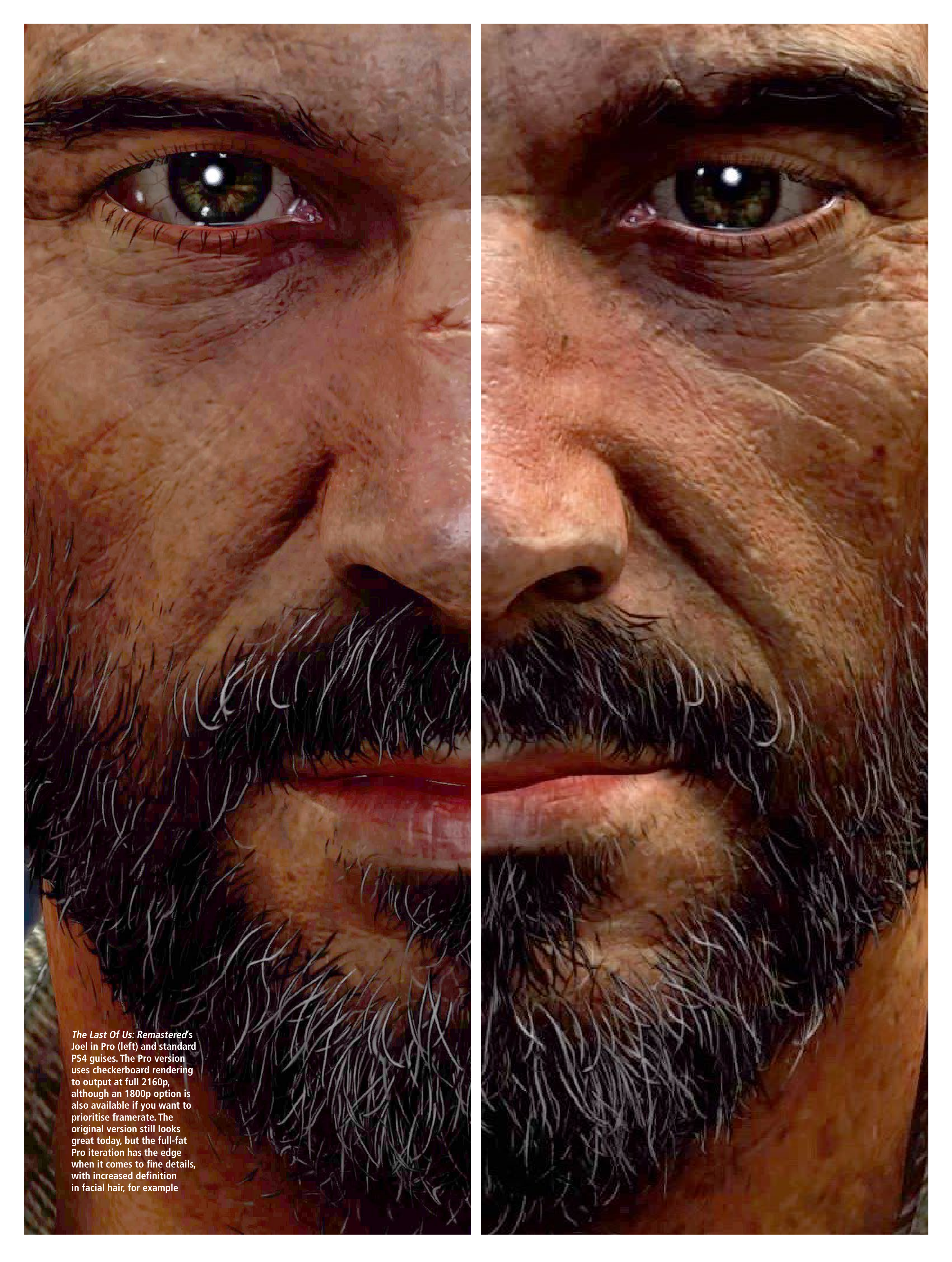
own on larger displays, but let's be clear: the base PS4 model running *Horizon Zero Dawn* on a 75-inch display is still a spectacle. PS4 Pro's resolution increases are gains worth having for aficionados, but they're refinements, not reinventions.

It's in using a high-end 4K HDR display that Sony's new hardware distinguishes itself a little more obviously. *The Last Of Us: Remastered* is a considerably richer, more realistically lit experience on Pro, as is *Infamous: First Light*, whose fizzing particle effects feel as if they were created to be consumed this way in the first place. Trying to achieve these results on a budget is dangerous, though, with several of the more affordable 4K HDR TVs doing the rounds at the moment failing to support HDR10, while those and others also have issues with running HDR outside of certain display modes, resulting in a degree of input lag that will be unacceptable to players of twitchy action games. Ultimately HDR display technology is still in its infancy for consumer products, and buying into the first wave is risky unless you have money to burn. For most, it's a good idea to wait until January's CES to see what's in store for 2017; by spring of next year you should be able to get £2,500 worth of 2016's TV technology for more like £1,500. In the meantime, there are obvious Pro benefits for PSVR owners. *Robinson: The Journey*, for example – already a great-looking game in standard form – benefits from increased draw distance, sharper rendering and enhanced lighting.

> PS4 Pro's resolution increases are gains worth having for aficionados, but they're refinements, not reinventions

So PS4 Pro makes life more complicated for Sony, which has to manage two platforms side by side without seeming to favour one over the other; for developers, who have to figure out how best to present enhanced versions (and set aside staff and time to make it happen); for retailers, which have to make room for a new platform whose nuances aren't easy to communicate; for certain TV manufacturers, which didn't plan for gaming applications when speccing their HDR configurations; and for the consumer, who not only has to think about what to do with old PS4 hardware but also consider a new, potentially very expensive display, and even then cannot be certain what 'enhanced for PS4 Pro' even means on a game-to-game basis.

All this, Xbox devotees will sneer, just to play a version of *Skyrim* that is essentially the high-detail PC version from five years ago? Yes, there will be more easy-to-knock-out cash-ins in the vein of *Skyrim: Special Edition* in the future, but they're distractions from forthcoming PS4 titles with Pro factored during their natural production cycles, rather than bolted on after the fact. When games such as the gorgeous HDR showcase *Days Gone* emerge, the issues surrounding PS4 Pro today will begin to fade from view. ■



The Last Of Us: Remastered's Joel in Pro (left) and standard PS4 guises. The Pro version uses checkerboard rendering to output at full 2160p, although an 1800p option is also available if you want to prioritise framerate. The original version still looks great today, but the full-fat Pro iteration has the edge when it comes to fine details, with increased definition in facial hair, for example

A new way to buy

Streaming is becoming a more commercial pursuit as Twitch begins selling games directly to viewers

Well, it was only ever a matter of time. Amazon bought game-streaming service Twitch in 2014, so it makes sense that the retail giant would eventually want to nudge all those viewers towards the checkout.

That has now happened with *Streamline*, a game currently available in Early Access that's designed specifically with streamers and their audiences in mind. Any Twitch stream of *Streamline* has a 'Get this game' link underneath. If a viewer clicks it, connects their Amazon and Twitch accounts and buys the game, the streamer gets a 30 per cent cut of the purchase price. Twitch calls this a Bounty, and it's a new opt-in feature available to Twitch Partners – the streamers with the largest audiences who already receive a cut of revenue from the advertising that runs alongside their videos.

"The early prototypes for the game were actually called *H&S* because they were [based on] hide and seek," **Seth Sivak**, CEO of *Streamline* developer Proletariat Inc, tells us. "That eventually moved to be a much faster-paced game, with parkour-style movement, and that was really just from a ton of time spent watching the game and seeing what was exciting for players and viewers." The result is an asymmetric multiplayer game in which a hunter, wielding a giant stop sign, must chase and swat a team of runners.

Streamline is currently the only game available to buy through Twitch, but it seems likely to be just the beginning. The game's design team worked with Twitch through the latter's Developer Success initiative, which exists to encourage developers to make games with Twitch integration at their core.

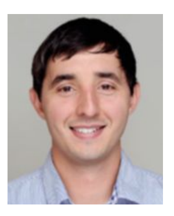
Just as developers tailor their games to the physical hardware they'll be played on, so too do they now tailor their games to Twitch. This has led to all kinds of industry changes, from a surge of wannabe esports and indie horror titles, to innovations such as letting livestream viewers influence games directly to troll the streamer – by triggering traps, for example. Vlambeer, creator of poppy top-down shooter *Nuclear Throne*, went so far as to hack in the ability to buy its game from Twitch streams back in 2014.

Sivak says he's glad that being able to sell games through Twitch lets him reach the game's intended audience directly. As for who that audience is, there's not much information publicly available. The most recently released official figures put Twitch's user count at over 100 million, watching an average of 421.6 minutes per month. That's a lot of opportunities to flog games.

"I think it's going to be harder for a lot of broadcasters to hide how engaged and how interested they are"

People who watch Twitch streams do so for different reasons. Some are there for the personality of the streamer, while some are looking to improve their own skills at a particular game. "I think others are there to find their next game," Sivak says. "Which is why you see, especially the singleplayer games, [their stats] spike up quickly in the first week they're out, because everyone's curious: 'Should I buy this?' Then they go back down because people have made that decision."

It's this last group that seems most likely to have a negative reaction to the streamers they watch getting a kickback from sales of the games they're broadcasting. "The direction that this stuff is going, with influencers driving a lot of the marketing and then when you start to have payment involved in there, I think it does change the discussion," Sivak says. "I don't know what the sentiment's going to be like as we see more of this but, from our perspective on *Streamline*, that hasn't really come up as an issue."



Seth Sivak, CEO of *Streamline* developer Proletariat Inc



While selling games seems a natural direction for Twitch, its public FAQ on the subject is unclear about the company's future plans but states that it's interested in seeing the "community's reception to *Streamline* being available for purchase via our platform". In other words, 'Expect more of this, unless you're angry at us about it'. It also describes the bounty as a "one-time promotion", implying that in future Twitch will keep more of the money for itself.

In any case, genuine outrage seems unlikely. Sponsored content is already a part of the language of Twitch, just as advertising breaks are a part of the language of commercial television.

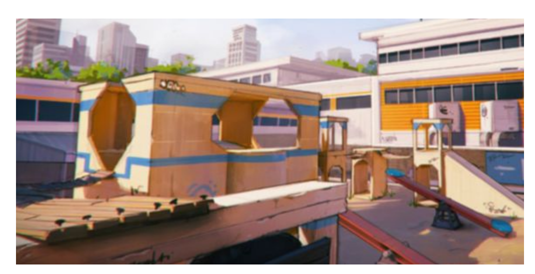
"I'm not sure how viewers are going to start to see [sponsored content]," Sivak says, "but I think it's going to be harder for a lot of broadcasters to hide how engaged and how interested they are. You can watch some broadcasters when they're doing sponsored stuff and you can tell they're not having fun with it. I think that's going to be a big challenge."

There might be a more fundamental challenge to overcome first: at the time of writing, there is only one person streaming *Streamline*, and they have zero viewers. Twitch integration is in its infancy and direct sales seem likely to be a part of its future, but like all new platforms, it still needs its killer app. ■

Sivak has two brothers and hopes to replicate on a larger scale the time when every game was multiplayer "because we'd be passing the controller on the couch"

Streamline**'s development has moved quickly since the start, the original prototype built in a week and a half**



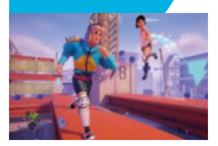




ABOVE **It was the game's warm response at PAX East that Sivak thinks prompted Twitch to partner with *Streamline*.** RIGHT **Sivak believes that every game in future will have some form of livestream integration**

DESIGN CHALLENGES

How to please all of the people all of the time



Developers are still working out the best way to make games that satisfy broadcasters, viewers and players. Clarity is one issue. "We went from firstperson to thirdperson because it was easier to see what's going on," Sivak says. "A viewer coming in, not necessarily at the start of a session, needs to know context very quickly." Another issue is that the three groups don't necessarily enjoy the same things. *Streamline* tries to address that with time-limited rule changes, to offer novelty to viewers without annoying players. One change, Crabcore, forces players to only move by strafing left and right and to animate like a crab.

Shifting sounds

How the composer of Get Even is taking videogame audio into a new dimension

The gaming industry of today has high demand for actors and musicians, but formal and practical approaches to recording audio have remained largely the same for the past decade. Games have soundtracks that dynamically shift to match the actions onscreen, and attract big-name composers and vocal talent, their work relayed in rich surround sound, but that isn't enough. While developers have rushed to use today's horsepower for visual and gameplay features, audio has been somewhat left behind.

Olivier Deriviere, a composer whose credits include *Remember Me* and *Assassin's Creed IV: Freedom Cry*, hopes that what we hear in videogames will one day be as immediate and vibrant as what we now see in them. His current project, the psychological thriller *Get Even* from Polish studio The Farm 51, is created using the fully 3D audio technology Auro-3D. Developed at Galaxy Studios in Belgium – where the Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra has been recording *Get Even*'s soundtrack – Auro-3D captures sound from around, above and below its source to give players a fuller sense of space and immersion. The technology has been used in movies for a while, but it's new territory for games.

"Usually when you record music, you get something 2D," Deriviere tells us. "You put 32 mics into a studio and there are maybe two that actually matter. But with Auro-3D not only do you use more mics, the processing and editing algorithm on the back end means you also get a lot more out of them. You get the sounds from every direction."

> "This is how we need to start approaching audio. Games have been 3D for a long time now"

Eerie and methodical, if you simply watch *Get Even* being played it may seem as if little is happening at all. But to listen to it – to appreciate not just the swell of Deriviere's score, but also the directions from which sound effects emanate, and how they respond to your actions – transforms the game's apparently sedate sequences into something much more involved.

"To serve a videogame, as a composer, you need to understand how a videogame is made," Deriviere says. "You need to have harmony, melody and rhythm all connected, all happening in realtime. The sound in *Get Even* isn't all rendered before you start playing and you're just listening to it, in order. I'm editing it to make it as interactive as possible.

"Using Auro and a MIDI setup we can connect sounds directly to in-game assets and events. Sometimes in *Get Even* there is very little of the musical score, but still you feel like there is 'music' – if you concentrate enough on the environment, it is musical. In the opening level, for example, all the sounds are tuned to C. You enter a room and the lights above and around you are all buzzing in C. This is how we need to start approaching audio. Games have been 3D for a long time now."

But Auro-3D, and Deriviere's approach to sound, constitute more than technological showboating. This is a psychological thriller, and the goal is to get inside your mind. The more real the audio mix feels, the greater the distress. But it's as much about a lack of sound as the presence of it. To simply stand in a room, silent in every direction, is to feel trapped inside a nightmare. And when the silence is shattered by distant bangs and rumbles, powered by some vivid Foley work, which grow steadily louder and closer thanks to Auro-3D, you feel suitably unnerved. Emotionally it's the face at the window in a horror flick, or the queasy feeling of peering over a sheer drop in VR.



There is shooting in The Farm 51's *Get Even* (see Hype, p42), but the sound design makes it a much less thrilling, and much more unsettling, act than in videogames generally. Pulling the trigger feels a lot more significant too

SIGNAL TO NOISE

***Get Even* could mark a new frontier in videogame sound design. But unlike virtual reality, which many studios have adopted rapidly, Deriviere believes that changing how the game industry thinks about audio will require a lot of effort and bring opposition. "I've been defending this approach, 3D audio, for years," he says. "But what you're telling people is, 'You need to work much harder. The way you like to work? You need to stop it. You need to stop writing music the way you would normally and start understanding games'. We're pioneers on this. No one has done it before. So it's difficult to be heard."**

Indeed, it's in virtual reality that these new techniques may come to the fore. With GPUs too busy minimising latency to push advanced effects, sound will play a much greater role in achieving a sense of presence. But *Get Even* shows that more traditional games can greatly benefit from the adoption of 3D audio.

"These are the games I like to see," Deriviere says. "Something which is a full and intense experience but still with limitations. There is still a whole story being told either through sound or music, and players will have no idea where it's going to go. *Get Even* isn't about killing people or saving the world. It's very intimate. The sound leads players through various developments until they reach something, a moment, where they feel like, 'Oh my God'." ■



Composer Olivier Deriviere at work alongside the Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra for the creation of *Get Even*'s soundtrack



SOAP AND SKIN

Polish studio iFun4all hands players a mop and some body bags

Serial Cleaner is a macabre PC stealth game in which you must get your employers off the hook by clearing up gory crime scenes while disposing of incriminating weapons and bodies. The salmon-tinted game looks like it has been wood-block printed, but the overall aesthetic is from a more recent era.

"We tried to capture the feel of the '70s while figuring out a style that would be immediately recognisable and unique," game designer and writer **Krzysztof Zięba** tells us. "Everything from the angles to the colour palette is inspired by authentic '70s design, but morphed through a lens that the art team worked out early in the game's development."

The flat art style has thrown up a few problems for the game's designers, especially when the player character moves behind walls – an issue solved by displaying him as an orange silhouette whenever occluded. Each level is also inspired by a real crime scene from the era, which initially seems like an inapposite component of an otherwise irreverent-feeling game.

"We thought it would add an air of authenticity to the game's '70s setting – it was the decade of the serial killer, after all," Zięba explains. "We reference them, but rarely in overt ways, because we understand that it's a grim, and still relatively recent, topic. The game's story focuses on a mysterious character who is tied to historical murders, so it will become apparent as the player progresses through the plot that those 'inspirations' make perfect sense."

Currently in Steam Early Access, *Serial Cleaner* is planned for release at the beginning of 2017. ■



Serial Cleaner's unnamed protagonist is a sharp dresser, somewhere in his 30s, and pretty handy with a vacuum cleaner

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I wanted you to never give up. No matter how fucking sucky you were, if you stuck with it, you'd get there. And that's life, man."

Oddworld founder **Lorne Lanning** reveals why he gave the hero of *Abe's Oddysee* infinite lives. Ah, if only that really was life, man



Gage Skidmore

"Sony have their own plans for it, and **I think Neil's plan for it is not the same**. Because my company doesn't have the rights, I can't help him too much."

Will Neil Druckmann's The Last Of Us movie happen? **Sam Raimi** seems doubtful



"We got it out and I think we played until 4am. We had work to do, but we did *nothing*. I said, 'You've got to **get that thing out of the house** – it's taken over our lives.'"

Frank Skinner recalls former housemate David Baddiel getting him hooked on *FIFA*

"I've been warned that I need to stop partying with my fans. **People tell me that there could be psychos."**

Well, these things are all relative, aren't they, **Tomonobu Itagaki**?



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Daytona 3 Championship USA*
Manufacturer Sega Amusements

Another month, another chance for a vintage arcade racer to make an unexpected comeback. This time it's the turn of Sega's iconic *Daytona USA*, as *Daytona 3 Championship USA* makes its debut at trade show IAAPA 2016. The prospect of getting stuck into a new *Daytona* is an enticing one, but it's difficult not to be a bit underwhelmed by a reveal trailer in which it's almost possible to miss the transition from the original game to the new one. Even so, *Daytona 3* certainly looks bright and sharp on the cabinet's 47in screen, and those skies have never looked bluer. It's heartening to discover that the game, which runs on PC hardware rather than an entirely bespoke Sega board, builds on the physics and AI of the original's engine, too.

There are three new tracks to tackle, each taking place at a different time of day, plus remastered versions of the classic lineup. The original cars are back, too, along with that unforgettable theme tune. Up to eight cabinets can be linked together, and each has a marquee screen that can either be used to display in-race highlights or the running order when in the new party mode – added in response to the popularity of venue-organised *Daytona* tournaments. The surprisingly subdued cabinets also feature cameras so that you can enjoy the anguish on your opponents' faces as you leave them behind (or their delight when you careen into a wall). Following carefully chosen location tests, Sega is aiming for a worldwide release by April.



My Favourite Game
John-Luke Roberts

The comedian on sandbox pressure, long-overdue Sonic victories, and the link between performance and games

John-Luke Roberts has written for television, radio and theatre, including shows such as Have I Got News For You, Never Mind The Buzzcocks, The News Quiz and The Now Show. He also performs live regularly, and co-hosts comedy night The Alternative Comedy Memorial Society. When he wants to spoil his productivity, he turns to games.

When did you first come into contact with videogames?
The first game I can remember was the Game Boy *Mario* game where he flies a plane for one level and shoots things… *Super Mario Land*. I'm not sure if it was made by Nintendo or a thirdparty, but it's got lots of the usual *Mario* things and then there's stuff like Easter Island heads running around. It's a bit odd. I mean, I was seven – there's a *chance* I dreamt it.

It's definitely real. What came next?
After that we got a Mega Drive, largely because my brother, who's nine years older than me, wanted one for his birthday. So then I was a Sega kid for a few years. Actually, I downloaded *Sonic 3* a few years ago on the Virtual Console on Wii, realising that I'd never finished it when I was younger. I got stuck on a bit where you have to jump on a floating barrel in the Carnival Night Zone. You had to use the D-pad to move it, but nobody ever told me. As an adult I worked it out quite quickly, but as a child I was just furious for months.

You didn't play with your brother?
I must have been eight and he was 17, so, no, not really. We're quite good friends now, though! I remember I had *Mickey Mouse And The Castle Of Illusion* and *Sonic*, and then I dropped out of playing for a few years. I came back just before my GCSEs with an N64, which was in some ways very badly timed.

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY
Roberts has written and starred in two one-man plays – Sock Puppet and One Man Pandemic – both of which have been performed in London and at the Edinburgh Fringe. He also co-wrote the sitcom Bull, featuring Robert Lindsay and Maureen Lipman, for UKTV, based on an earlier BBC radio play. Dates and details for his regular live show tours can be found via his Twitter page, @jlukeroberts.



Did your results suffer?
Well, they were OK. But I really shouldn't brag about that because I'm 31. But I have these periods of my life where I drop out for a few years, forget that when I play videogames it completely ruins my productivity, and then jump back in again. Then a year or two just goes by without me managing anything and then I *have* to drop out again for a bit. I have to pick my games quite carefully because I get sucked in for a long time when I start playing them.

"I have to pick my games quite carefully because I get sucked in for a long time when I start playing"

Are you on a break at the moment?
I've been at clown school for a year and a half, as you do, so I've had a little break and now I'm eyeing up my consoles and wondering whether to start again.

So you have a weakness for big games?
Actually, I don't like sandbox games much. I want to feel like there's a clear plot that I should be sent along. Maybe it is because I don't want to get lost in the game too much, but I want to know that what I'm doing has a purpose and somebody else has come up with the best thing I could be doing. I don't like it when sidequests take over. I played the first couple of *Arkham* games a lot, and really got drawn in. But the time pressure they try and sneak in, where whenever you go off to do something they say, 'Hurry, you've got to go here,' but you know you *don't* have to hurry and it's just a lie – all the urgency of the thing slips away a bit. The game is sort of built against itself in order to get you to do all of these things.

Do you have the same preference for direction over improvisation in your own material?
Oh, no, you build the frameworks, but everything needs to happen live in the room. That doesn't necessarily mean improvisation, but it can help. In my solo stuff I use a lot of audience interaction, which means a lot of thinking on your feet, so it's a bit Choose Your Own Adventure-y, where you know if you get a certain response for doing a certain thing there's something you can do that will get a laugh off the back of that. It becomes a game – in many ways, a sandbox game. *But* with a clear route under the surface!

And which game is your favourite?
The first *Portal*. The plotting of it was so beautiful. Normally you play a videogame and the plotting is kind of here and there, and as a scriptwriter I don't feel I can get a lot out of that. I feel like I'm wasting time a bit, whereas watching a film I feel like I'm learning something. But *Portal* is just incredibly put together and so funny all of the time. ■



Roberts is a big fan of stealth games. "It appeals to my basic cowardice, which was one of the things I liked in the early *Arkham* games: wait, drop on them, then run away"

WEBSITE

Deus Ex design document
bit.ly/deusexdoc

Though published in part on Eurogamer in 2013, Reddit user Defaultplayer001 has now acquired the original design document for *Deus Ex*, along with similar documentation for the cancelled *Thief 4* and *Deus Ex 3* projects. While all three are fascinating reads, it's the voluminous *Deus Ex* doc – called *Shooter: Majestic Revelations* – that pulls rank. The 64-page document was created in August '97 and is covered in handwritten annotations from lead designer Warren Spector. It details the original intention to create a semi-open world, as well as characters who didn't make it into the finished game, and different endings. But the best aspect is its combative tone, the document riddled with aspirations such as: "Guess what was in the designer's mind when he created *this* stupid puzzle."



VIDEO

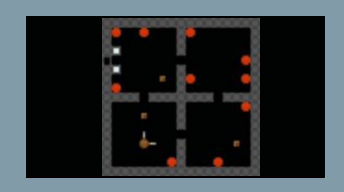
Tricky Mario: Val's Shellspace
bit.ly/marioshellspace

Published earlier this year but now getting a wider audience via word of mouth, this excruciating video documents YouTube user Val JP's arduous attempt to upload a particularly brutal *Mario Maker* creation. Even blessed with the advantage of knowing the level inside out, its determined creator burns through 32,873 attempts before finally making it all the way to the end – an ordeal that takes him around 61 hours. He's condensed that process down to just shy of eight-and-a-half minutes for the video, thankfully, but it's hard not to share his exaltation at the end.

WEB GAME

Stand Off
bit.ly/standoffgame

This tiny ten-level puzzle game puts a Wild West spin on the traditional block-shifting setup, and tasks you with backing out of tense saloon standoffs without a shot being fired. Played top down, you manoeuvre a brown dot around the stages and must reach the exit at the perimeter of each level. Red dots represent your enemies, who will shoot you on sight if you move directly in line with them. You have a pair of six shooters to use as deterrents, drawn by pressing X and then choosing a direction to aim using the arrow keys. So long as you have one of your guns pointing at an enemy, they won't fire on you. A handy undo button means you can experiment without too much frustration, but each level becomes an amusingly intense extrication as you try to keep all angles covered.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BOARD GAME

Beasts Of Balance
bit.ly/beastsofbalance

Sensible Objects' Beasts Of Balance is a beautifully made blend of physical and digital game that asks you to stack chunky model animals precariously on an NFC-equipped plinth. These creatures then appear in a world on your phone or tablet, and each one has a 'fabulousness' rating which depletes – in accordance with jealousy of the most fabulous creature in play – every turn. If that rating reaches zero, the animal will die, but special pieces allow you to boost their rating, create hybrids, migrate existing creatures between land, sea and air, and even cast miracles that stockpile lost fabulousness at the cost of imposing timers or tasks. A fine production all round, with relaxed rules that mean you can be as cooperative or competitive with your family as you like this Christmas.



continue

Clear view
Microsoft attempts to create an affordable Windows VR standard

Off the Boll
Infamous director Uwe Boll bows out of film-making forever

Mech it right
No paid-for multiplayer DLC or season pass for *Titanfall 2*

Vapourware
Steam revamps its storefront and bans bullshots from listings

quit

Motion denied
But if your headset doesn't have motion tracking, count us out

Price climbers
EBay guarantees huge returns for NES Classic resellers

Shoot and scoot
But DICE still intends to split its playerbase with future DLC

Undead nightmare
Racist zombies have crept into *Dead Rising 4*, apparently



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TWEETS

No Man's Sky was a mistake.
Hello Games @hellogames
No Man's Sky studio

If anything was a mistake, it was using LinkedIn without 2FA.
Sean Murray @NoMansSky
Hello Games co-founder

Old media is no longer the industry's preferred vector of frictionless unmarked advertising. This is, if anything, liberating.
Chris Thursten @CThursten
Editor, PC Gamer Pro

I just bought moustache wax (don't ask) and the ingredients are an RPG recipe: beeswax, shea butter, fir resin and castor oil.
Alex Hutchinson @BangBangClick
Creative director, Ubisoft Montreal



DISPATCHES
JANUARY



Issue 300

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month (normally) wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store



Tech support

Isn't it strange that, upon watching the Nintendo Switch's reveal video, I realised how *content* I was with mainstream games on PS4, Xbox One and PC? I was satisfied. Filled. Not excited. *Uncharted 4* was good. *Doom* was good. *MGSV*, *The Witcher III*, *Life Is Strange*, *Bloodborne*, *Rocket League* – all… *good*. But it's all a bit familiar, isn't it? I feel like I could have been playing these games just as contently on my PS3. Especially in the cases of *MGSV* and *LIS*, which actually were released on PS3. *Rocket League* was originally meant to be on PS3, apparently. So, I can't help but shake the feeling that, so far, the PS4 and XB1 have been the same, just better. There's nothing wrong with that, but the allure of a nice gaming PC becomes ever more tempting, especially with these new console upgrades, which make the respective systems feel even more like PCs, but not quite PCs.

> "I don't care about graphical or performance one-upmanship. I care about the games"

Then along comes Switch. My initial reaction was most unexpected: a mere, 'Huh, OK'. Twenty-odd rewinds later, it sunk in that this is truly innovative. Useful, even. Yes, I would like to play *Breath Of The Wild* on the TV, or wherever I deem fit to play. Yes, *Splatoon* as well. And *Dragon Quest XI*! Why, I wouldn't mind *everything* being on Switch. *Persona 5*? I only hope. That one's inevitable, isn't it?

Anyway, it dawned on me that, primarily being a console gamer with a laptop for interesting indies, I don't care about graphical or performance one-upmanship. I care more about the games themselves, innovation, convenience, and access to said games. I would genuinely prefer playing every multiplatform game on the Switch and keeping my PS4 just for the odd exclusive;I need to be able to scratch the occasional *Bloodborne* itch, after all.

So yes, thirdparty developers, please make games for, or available on, Nintendo Switch. That would be very handy. This is the most useful new feature a console has had since, well, dual analogue sticks, I think. Now that's exciting. Roll on 2017!
Ben McManus

Thirdparty publishers are always on board early on, but the popularity of firstparty releases has a nasty habit of ensuring that support falls away before long. It feels like a hugely important question for Switch: can more stay the course time around?

Power play

Only Nintendo could have the gall to include a five-year-old game in the unveiling of a new console philosophy. Against the backdrop of the 4K, HDR loveliness touted by Sony and Microsoft, playing *Skyrim* again on Nintendo Switch isn't exactly thrilling.

But innovation isn't just about power. An increased pixel count is just impressive on the surface. A good-looking bad game is still a bad game.

Microsoft's Project Scorpio and Sony's PS4 Pro find themselves pitching to an increasingly niche crowd. Further blurring the line between console and PC, why accept the inherent limits of owning a console only to spend amounts comparable to a decent rig on a slightly improved Xbox or PS4?

Even as a non-PC gamer, bewildered by drivers, processors and teraflops (the latter sounding as real as a flux capacitor), I find this hard to reconcile. Both Pro and Scorpio require substantial investment if console owners want to fully realise the potential of their incremental upgrade. All for innovation that's only skin deep.

That's not the case with Switch. Emerging from the death throes of the struggling PS Vita and Wii U, Nintendo's vision for the Switch is its own beast. Pinching the most promising concepts from each, the Switch



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Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

promises triple-A gaming on the go that can be played on either handheld or TV.

It appears to be both a recognisable console and something entirely new. There's a demand for the pursuit of photorealism, but, for those really willing to pay for it, the place to spend those pounds isn't on a console. The Nintendo Switch won't be the most powerful console on the market, and that should be embraced.

Consoles must do something that PCs can't. Convenient, accessible and new, the Switch is what console gamers really need.
Harry Shepherd

Well, Wii U also did something that PCs can't, and we saw how that turned out. The key, surely, is to offer a solution to a problem people actually yearn to see solved. Switch appears to hit that target.

Not your shield

I will be buying a Switch on day one, having been a fan of Nintendo's software and hardware for decades. However, I am not the audience that needs convincing for this to be a massmarket proposition. The console-games-on-the-go paradigm, as ushered in by the Vita (my all-time fave handheld), was rejected by the mass market in the face of iPad adoption, substandard experiences (looking at you, *COD*, *Resistance* and, to some extent, *Uncharted*), and a ruinous memory-card strategy.

The Switch is positioned as a full-blown console you can take with you – a subtly different proposition. PSNow/Remote Play on the Vita this is not. On the positive side, a custom Tegra, coupled with decent controls, a good-sized screen, battery, fast cartridges and ergonomics that appear well-thought-out (and adaptable) all suggest a robust solution.

Nvidia's Shield Tablet running *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, *Portal* and *Doom 3* was certainly compelling, even without the option for Gamevice-style controls. Desktop play did at times feel redundant, and I now move between the Shield TV and Shield portable. Switch blends all three, and will benefit from that flexibility enormously.

In the end, the games will determine its success, and design decisions will need to take into account sedentary and mobile play scenarios. Sophisticated save states and fast switching between TV and handheld modes (Shield was not fast on that front) will be essential features at OS level. It is important to remember that amazing handheld experiences are possible, and even preferable to a full-blown console game, if done well. I hope it succeeds.
James Spiers

Well, this is all very positive, isn't it? Suspiciously so. Surely someone's going to pop up and wipe the smiles off our faces at some point, though. It *is* 2016, after all.

Recycle path

We have something in common this month: we've both celebrated our 30th anniversary. OK, so yours has an extra zero on the end, but I feel like it's something we can raise a glass to.

I have friends who were terrified at the notion of turning 30, suddenly Tindering as though their lives depended on it. Luckily I didn't feel the sudden need to impregnate the nearest human being due to an arbitrary date change. However, I did feel a guilty pang that all gamers must embrace at some point: hoarding. Despite the manufacturers' promise of clutter-free digital libraries, I find myself concerned with the real possibility of being crushed by a shelf of special editions falling on me. Just last week I caressed Death's cheek when I slipped on a *Rock Band* drumkit support pole.

And so with a few painful mouse clicks I had to place my collection of over 200 **Edge** magazines up for sale. I've been reading **Edge** since I was teenager. My first **Edge** magazine sparked a fire in me. I genuinely didn't know serious conversations were taking place around videogames. And as the years went on I was always respectful that **Edge** trod the line between sincerity and sarcasm towards games. I've spoken to gamers and developers who have turned their nose up when they see me reading a copy of **Edge** magazine, and yet always showed great interest when **Edge** awarded a perfect score.

And as **Edge** carried on, I grew as well. I grew from the embarrassed 16-year-old buying the infamous bikini-clad **E**121 into the well-rounded gamer I am today. But, alas, at 30, sacrifices have to be made. And as I sell off my **Edge** collection (along with a small fleet of gaming items) I can sit back, switch my subscription to digital-only, grab a fine brandy, lean back in my wing-tip chair, set off my PS4 system update, and just dream at what the next 30 years of gaming will entail.
Jack Marshall

Yep, that'll do it. Thanks for restoring normal order, Jack. Did you really have to include the eBay link? Anyway, happy 30th. We hope someone helps you celebrate it by burning all of your favourite old clothes.

Workers' rights

One line in The Making Of... *Ori And The Blind Forest* (**E**299) stood out like a sore thumb. With regards to the game's savepoint system, Thomas Mahler said he was worried that players would feel like they had "lost half an hour of work".

I don't regard games as work. I play them to relax, to enjoy myself and, occasionally, to avoid thinking about work. I rarely play games that require a grind and typically stop playing when a game feels like a chore.

I would like assurance that Mr Mahler's comment is not shared by other developers and that my favourite leisure pursuit is never regarded as 'work' once I'm in control.
Richard Stratton

We haven't awarded a 3DS yet, but we don't want to add to your workload, Richard, so we'll keep this month's to ourselves. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

As long as you and I have been playing videogames, there have been scare stories about their noxious effects on our minds. You'd think that after decades of the artform's maturation, and the constant, patient rebuttal of accusations, more care would be taken over the subject. And then you read a newspaper story headlined 'Fears grow for children addicted to online games'. Oh, do they? Whose fears? How many children? Are they really "addicted"?

Soon enough, the article in question cites some anecdata offered by a certain "Dr Aric Sigman, a freelance lecturer in child health". Now I don't know about you, but when I see someone described as a freelance lecturer in child health I do not immediately assume that he represents the sober consensus of the medical community. It turns out that this energetic doctor has also warned us of the dangers of television, "the social web", and alcohol – or, in other words, pretty much everything that gives people pleasure. Of kids ruining their lives through online gaming, Sigman shouts: "Whether you call it an addiction or not, this is an enormous and growing problem."

Well, is it? The article itself offers no solid evidence at all that it is. Which is unfortunate, because real research exists. There is, for example, a very interesting new paper entitled 'Internet Gaming Disorder: Investigating the Clinical Relevance of a New Phenomenon', by Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Kou Murayama. The next edition of the diagnostic manual for American psychiatrists, DSM, may include 'Internet Gaming Disorder' (IGD) as a new issue in mental health. So, the authors explain, it's incumbent on everyone to understand it – assuming it's real, which not everyone agrees it is in the first place.

After polling many thousands of people in the US, UK, Canada and Germany, the authors analyse a solid data-set and offer some careful conclusions. For one thing, it seems that "dysregulated gaming" (obsessive playing accompanied by distress such that it might qualify as IGD) is significantly less common than problematic online gambling – which currently is the only behavioural addiction recognised as a psychiatric disorder. (Did the newspaper scare story about online videogames mention the comparatively greater prevalence of gambling addiction? It did not.) For another thing, the stereotype of the *Warcraft*-addicted gamer as antisocial misfit who never leaves the basement is also, perhaps surprisingly, unsupported by the evidence: the authors tested a hypothesis that people who would qualify as having IGD would also report enjoying less social contact during the rest of their waking hours. In fact they did not.



The next edition of the diagnostic manual for US psychiatrists may include 'Internet Gaming Disorder'

From their data the authors figure that somewhere between 0.3% and 1% of players would qualify for "a potential acute diagnosis" of IGD, which is lower than the mean of previous estimates. And IGD might in fact just be a symptom of what they call, in a rather beautiful technical phrase, "self-regulatory challenges epiphenomenal to electronic game play". (In other words, if you have difficulty disciplining your own behaviour in general, you're likely to have that difficulty with online games, but it's not the games themselves that are causing it.) So before IGD really is erected as a new mental disorder, they conclude, "more evidence for clinical and behavioral effects is needed".

This may seem a damp-squib conclusion, but it is actually news – that the evidence for links between a potential online-gaming disorder and negative physical, social or mental-health outcomes is "decidedly mixed". It's much more important news, indeed, than a scaremongering article. As the study authors conclude: "Internet-based games are currently one of the most popular forms of leisure, and researchers studying their potential 'darker sides' must be cautious."

But note that the real reason why such media stories are so pernicious is not that they invent something that definitely doesn't exist; it's that they could lull us into a habit of dismissing any such concerns about videogames at all as just more of the same old demonisation. Maybe IGD deserves the imprimatur of psychiatry, maybe it doesn't. It's too early to say. But we do know for sure that designers of online games work very hard to make them as addictive as possible. For most of us, the effort they expend won't ruin our lives. For others, it might. And to dismiss the possibility completely is just as irresponsible as to exaggerate it.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Misery. Loss. A sense of futility, as if nothing you ever do matters, or ever will. I am talking, of course, about videogames. Like many of you, I suspect, I've found games an essential source of comfort from the real world of late. We all play games to relax, and escape – or so we think. With the world outside such a relentless source of anxiety and misery, the games on my consoles' hard drives no longer feel like enough of a break from the norm.

This is a matter of setting, admittedly – *The Last Of Us* feels like a training program these days – and also of tradition. Games began in the arcades; designed not just to test reflexes, but also empty wallets. At least modern games ease you in with tutorials, mix up the pace a bit to let you catch your breath, and – in most cases, at least – do not base their design on the need to make more money out of you. Yet still, stress, pain and the fear of loss are the bloody, beating heart of almost every game on the market.

Destiny is a curious case in point, because 90 per cent of the time it's one of the most relaxing games I play. Power creep over the game's life means I'm now over-levelled for most of *Destiny*'s activities, and I can happily spend an evening trotting around a mission I know like the back of my hand, chatting to my pals. Bungie's Luke Smith describes *Destiny* perfectly as "the bar I can go to in my pyjamas and shoot the shit with my friends". But every so often something comes along that wrenches you out of your comfort zone, punches you in the face for four hours, and leaves you wondering why you bother. This week it was a challenge-mode spin on a raid boss fight that only required a few tweaks to our normal strategy, but involved hours of teeth-gnashing failure. The easy harmony of the nightly party chat strains as people start pointing fingers, scapegoating, the volume levels rising until people are shouting over each other just to be heard, none saying much of use. We've all had far too much of that lately.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

I'd inch round real-world corners with my shield up too, if I had one, and wasn't worried about looking weird

The difference, and the reason games feel more important to me than ever, is that throughout the countless evenings lost to failure, as players we know that we shall overcome. That practice and teamwork will deliver us to victory and sweet, sweet loot. This year, nation-defining votes have been won on the questionable promise of regaining control – but in games, control is the constant, the blame only ever your own, triumph only ever a matter of persistence. In the real world, power is largely a myth. In games, we can all ascend to the ranks of the one per cent.

Games also give us control over the type of stress we subject ourselves to, and how we choose to engage with it. A friend tells me that the *Souls* series' PVP invasions get his blood pumping and sphincter clenching like nothing else in games; he wins more than he loses, but even when things aren't going his way he enjoys every second of a fight. Personally I find FromSoftware's games oppressive and intimidating enough as they are, thank you very much. Rather than setting my pulse racing, the invasion message invites in me a slump of the shoulders, a roll of the eyes and a sprint back to the nearest bonfire, so that when death inevitably comes I'll only be a few steps from my bloodstain when I respawn. What can I say? *Souls* games bring out my inner wuss. I'd inch round real-world corners with my shield up too, if I actually had one, and wasn't worried about looking weird.

Perhaps it's not the case that games are escapism, as such, but catharsis: the zombie massacre unwinding us from a dreary commute, a game of *Street Fighter* helping blow off steam after work. Maybe we play them not to forget our problems, but to confront and process them. If that's the case then we need them more than ever – and within them I already find new meaning. *Watch Dogs 2*'s portrayal of minority youth betrayed by the system designed to protect them suddenly feels perfectly timed. In the middle of an outer-space dogfight in *Infinite Warfare* I find myself tracing a narrative line back to current events, and it no longer feels so much like science fiction. No doubt developers and scriptwriters will soon begin work on games that more literally reflect the current state of the world, but they don't really need to. The thematic notion of a near-future dystopia, so beloved of people who make games, feels a whisker away from reality. You really want to offer me escapism? Give me a game where everyone's nice.

When he's not in his garden marking out the dimensions of an underground shelter, Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s deputy editor*



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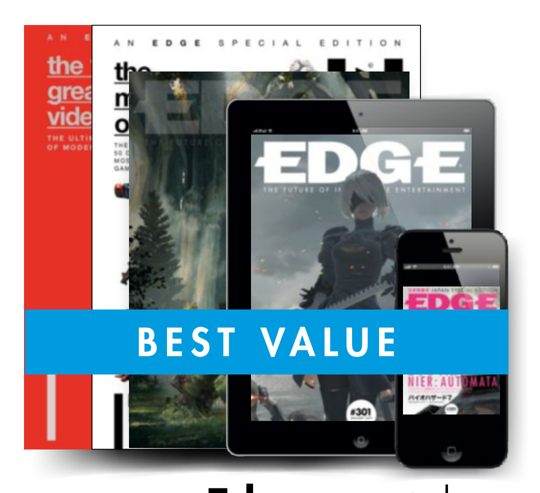


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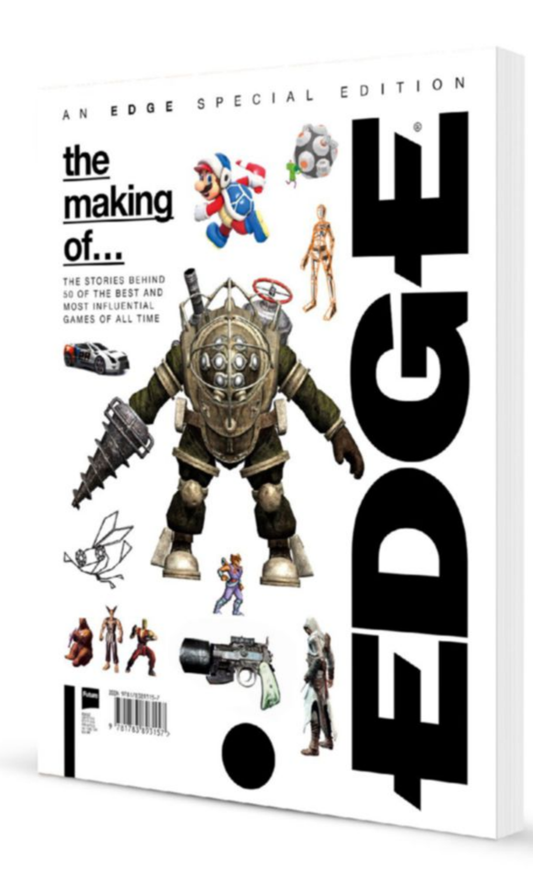
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#301

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Back to basics

Given the rate at which technology improves, a layman might expect that videogames would only ever get bigger and busier. You've got all this new processing power – surely that just means you can stuff more things into the mix than you would have otherwise? "Well, yes… perhaps," you'd say, your eyes scanning the room in search of someone – anyone – else to talk to. The reality is that, yes, technology improves as time passes, and to creators that extra processing headroom is extremely handy. But as videogames mature, so too does their creators' understanding of effective design – and in games, as elsewhere, less can definitely be more.

It's a common refrain among this month's Hype crop. Striking indie adventure *Lost Ember* (p38) had environmental puzzles and a combat system at one point in its development, until its makers realised that a little restraint can go a long way – even after the Kickstarter money came flowing in – and began to pare the game back to its bare essentials. *Battlerite* (p50) blends core elements of MOBAs and fighting games, but thumbs its nose at the expectation that games in either of those genres should have dozens-strong character rosters, and is all the better for its austerity. *Nioh* (p46) was once a JRPG, until one day Koei Tecmo realised that the best thing to do in a game about samurai is chop up bad guys with some really nice swords. It is now the spiritual *Ninja Gaiden* successor we've wanted Team Ninja to make for years.

Sometimes, then, you just have to focus on what you do best. Which is why, seven games and countless spinoffs and remasters later, *Resident Evil 7* (p34) is going back to its roots, feeling in tone, content and spirit like a return to the values of the genre-defining 1996 original. Our layman friend might well see that as a retrograde step, despite the use of modern console power and inclusion of game-wide PSVR support. Clearly, he never played *Resident Evil 6*.

MOST WANTED

Overkill's The Walking Dead PC, PS4, Xbox One
It's all gone a bit quiet at Starbreeze, which announced its intriguing co-op foray into Robert Kirkman's zombie universe over two years ago. All that deal has yielded to date is Negan's barbed-wire bat in *Payday 2*, and you'd have to be a monster to use that. More soon, we hope.

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild Switch, Wii U
With the nights well and truly drawn in, it's the perfect time for a new *Zelda*. As if the wait wasn't painful enough already, the rumour mill now has it that it won't be ready for Switch's launch in March. Gah.

Knights And Bikes PC, PS4
Rex Crowle and Moo Yu's paean to 1980s childhood is now to be published by Double Fine. Tim Schafer's outfit seems an ideal fit for *Knights And Bikes*' easy whimsy; now all we need is a release date. Whenever you're ready, chaps.



RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD

Four hours inside Capcom's firstperson reinvention cranks up the nostalgia factor

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4, PSVR, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release January 24

Jill sandwiches might not be on the menu during the Baker family's mealtime, but it's one of only a few ingredients from the first *Resident Evil* that haven't been brought back for the series' latest makeover. As we're let loose inside the game for an entire afternoon, it's hard to decide whether the biggest shocks come from some fine-tuned jump scares or the sensation that *Resident Evil 7* is simply a modern-day remake of the original with zombies traded out for Nemesis-like menaces.

Familiar items, weapons and even puzzles are riddled throughout, and the structure of the world is too similar to Chris and Jill's Spencer Mansion episode to be accidental: early hours are spent clearing out the rooms of a large house harbouring secret passages to hunt down a trio of emblems in order to unlock the exit. It's a doorway that leads not to safety, but a path winding to a second, smaller building. That the route takes us to a dilapidated swamp house rather than a guardhouse, or that the main area's a dingy, unkempt Louisianan manor instead of a gleaming stone mansion high up in the mountains, does little to mask the similarities; the switch to firstperson might once have sounded like a drastic step into new territory for the mainline series, but this is the closest Capcom has come to recapturing the atmosphere of the 1996 original since the 2002 GameCube remake.

Cast as the vulnerable Ethan Winters, we pick up the story approximately 45 minutes into the game as the entire Baker family – father Jack, mother Marguerite, son Lucas and a wheelchair-bound grandma – sits around an offal-laden table. When arguments and phone calls tempt the family into other rooms, Ethan topples his chair, frees his legs and we begin our escape attempt.

We get no farther than the hallway outside the opening kitchen/dining area before Jack reappears, armed with a shovel. We can either run or hide, but as we zero in on a key that could help us escape, Jack bursts through the wall and gives chase. Careful peering around corners and creeping at the right time lets us snatch up the key and scrabble towards the temporary safety of a save room to record progress with a cassette recorder, but not before a hefty whack from the spade covers our screen in blood spatters.

The save room presents us, weaponless, cornered and wounded, with an opportunity to take stock. A smartwatch called a Codex is strapped to our left wrist, and in one of many nods back to the '96 outing it displays our health as a coloured ECG readout whenever we check the inventory screen. Currently ▶



In a move that will upset fans of ink ribbon, there's no limit to the number of saves you can make on cassette recorders. If it's any consolation, the default difficulty is harsher than usual







amber, we top it up by combining a herb and a bag of yellow Chem fluid in the Quick Combine menu to create a medium first-aid kit. Health items are mapped to R1, and pressing it sees Ethan take out a jar and splash healing tonic all over his left hand to patch up his wounds. Later on, we find more potent red Chem packs that can be combined with herbs for strong first-aid kits, while mixing gunpowder with the liquid produces regular and stronger handgun bullets, depending on the Chem fluid's strength.

Our first taste of combat is just around the corner. Having now scooped up both a penknife and a pistol and used the first to slice open the tape that bound the casing of an electronic door-panel switch, we find ourselves trapped inside the Baker's small garage with Jack. Though Ethan can move while aiming, Jack's speed combined with an alarming ability to soak up bullets puts us on the back foot. Helpfully, a blocking move on L1 reduces damage from blows and leaves our quarry momentarily stunned. Still, Jack's ability to absorb bullets means guns won't get us very far here, but grabbing keys from a workbench and jumping into Ethan's sports car for a spot of close-quarters road rage does the trick. Speaking later with the development team, it transpires that crunching Poppa Baker's body against the garage's breeze blocks isn't the only way to end this fight.

With Jack beaten, we can begin exploring our surroundings at a slightly more measured clip. The house is full of objects to pick up and inspect: tins to pry open, pictures to analyse, nodding bobbleheads to shoot, and VHS tapes to insert into VCRs in order to trigger playable flashback chapters from the viewpoints of other characters tortured by the Bakers. Manually interacting with a nut on the back of a picture frame lets us unscrew a bronze ox statuette, which neatly slots into a plaque on a grand set of double doors and opens up the mansion's main hall.

Again, nostalgia takes hold as the grand balconied entrance splinters off into different passageways and rooms; some open, many secreted away behind doors with animals inscribed on the locks. Helpfully, these

Chest shots do little damage to the gelatinous Molded creatures – you'll need to remove their limbs or pop their heads to keep them down. Alternatively, shutting doors can trap them in certain rooms







LEFT **One new item among the familiar herbs, emblems and cranks is the Psychostimulant pack. Chugging these temporarily highlights every nearby object with a marker, helping you to sniff out valuable ammo and health deviously hidden in the shadows**



TOP LEFT **The knife is handy during the frequent moments of ammunition depletion, but it won't help you clear away the masses of killer bugs that block certain doorways or cupboards: you'll need the flamethrower for those.** ABOVE **New weapons and character upgrades such as permanent health boosts and quicker reload speeds are found inside birdcages. Collect hidden antique coins to go on a shopping spree**

To help survive the tougher areas with health and ammo supplies intact, it pays to abuse the infinite save system and sacrifice yourself to work out enemy behaviour loops. The Molded, for instance, can't stray too far from their spawn points

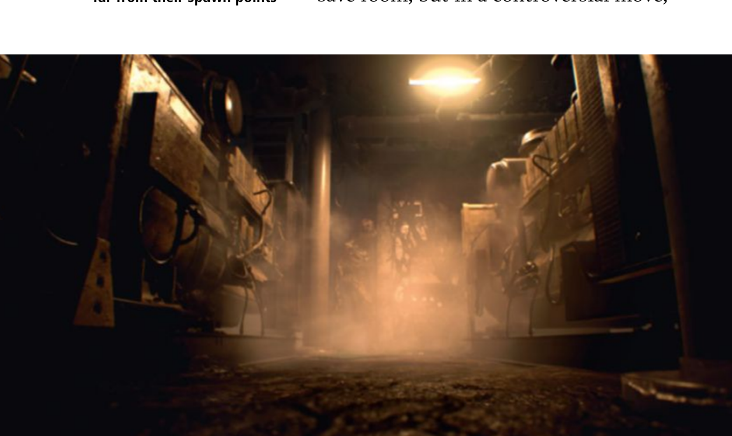
discoveries are jotted down on the map, which becomes a point of reference while exploring and backtracking through the vast plantation and a trusty guide as to where to explore next whenever a new type of key is unearthed.

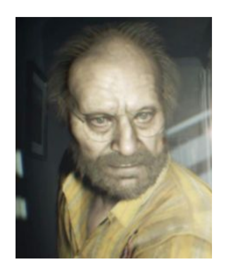
Combat again comes to the fore down in the labyrinthine basement. In a moment neatly foreshadowed by ominous notes about kidnapped strangers being transformed by the Bakers, we come face-to-maw with the Molded. A combination of *Resident Evil 4*'s Regenerators and *Revelations'* Ooze, they're tall, toothy golems birthed out of clumps of black ichor pasted onto every surface. With the shotgun not appearing until later, even one-on-one fights with these brutes prove tough, with multiple headshots required to kill them. Multiple deaths occur when three attack at once, booting us back to a nearby save room, but in a controversial move, copping it in other areas, such as during boss battles, will trigger checkpointed reloads. "We're trying to smooth the process of getting back into the game after dying, rather than limit the possibility of dying," explains executive producer **Jun Takeuchi** regarding this softening of the classic save-system rules.

Despite the game favouring puzzles and exploration over combat, after four hours we've stockpiled a flamethrower, a grenade launcher and a .44 Magnum revolver – and encountered ample reasons to use them. Pulsating hives of giant, killer hornets in the swamp house, patrolling family members, and a static encounter with Marguerite in which we're trapped in a hole all do their part to burn through our supplies. All the while, plentiful backtracking to open up fresh areas with new items gives rise to fresh shocks, as tense games of hide-and-seek with the deranged family contrast nicely against the all-out horror of Molded dropping through ceiling vents mere centimetres from your face.

Plentiful backtracking to open up fresh areas with new items gives rise to fresh shocks

Cutscenes, QTEs and overblown heroics have been well and truly exorcised, leaving a considered horror that cleverly borrows concepts from the likes of *PT* and *Outlast* without feeling overly derivative. Knowingly cheesy dialogue and scenes spanning bathtub-draining right through to enemies bursting through windows (this time it's hornets, not ravenous dogs, responsible for our yelps) reinforce the series' '90s values at every available opportunity, softening the impact felt by the change in location and cast. The result is a shift every bit as daring as the jump from *Resident Evil Zero* to *Resident Evil 4* – and one that might yet be every bit as successful, too. ■





The walking dread

With *Resi 7* playable from start to finish in VR, a mode exclusive to PlayStation VR for one year, much work has gone into comfort options. Though digital 30-degree snap-turns are mapped to the right stick by default, the most crucial adaption according to lead VR engineer **Kazuhiro Takahara** involves the speed. "Showing a character walking on the screen, there's a certain speed that feels good," he notes. "When directly translating that character movement speed to VR, it was just too fast. We dialled it down a bit, and movement speed is a little slower in VR. It doesn't feel too different a game experience, but it helps you feel like you're not rushing through this virtual space."





LOST EMBER

This ambitious adventure invites us to heed the call of the wild

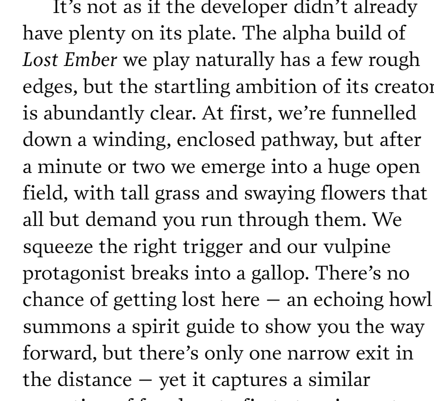
Developer/publisher Mooneye Studios
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Germany
Release 2018

"The wolf was one of the first things we decided on," says Mooneye Studios CEO Tobias Graff. "Everyone just loved the idea of being in the forest and playing this majestic creature"





Good game design is often more about subtraction than addition. The accessibility of modern creative tools has allowed artists the opportunity to realise their visions more fully than ever before. But while the removal of technological barriers is obviously a net positive, there's much to be said for imposing boundaries. In its early stages of development, *Lost Ember* had environmental puzzles and rudimentary combat systems. But Mooneye Studios quickly realised these more conventional ideas were unnecessary. "We all played *Journey* and really loved the relaxing and atmospheric gameplay, and we were trying to do something similar," the studio's CEO and programmer, **Tobias Graff**, explains. "When we played games like that – or, more recently, *Firewatch* – we reduced these classical elements because we felt they were standing in the way of what we were trying to do."



CEO and programmer Tobias Graff

It captures a similar sensation of freedom to first stepping out of the sewers in Oblivion

It's not as if the developer didn't already have plenty on its plate. The alpha build of *Lost Ember* we play naturally has a few rough edges, but the startling ambition of its creator is abundantly clear. At first, we're funnelled down a winding, enclosed pathway, but after a minute or two we emerge into a huge open field, with tall grass and swaying flowers that all but demand you run through them. We squeeze the right trigger and our vulpine protagonist breaks into a gallop. There's no chance of getting lost here – an echoing howl summons a spirit guide to show you the way forward, but there's only one narrow exit in the distance – yet it captures a similar sensation of freedom to first stepping out of the sewers in Bethesda's *Oblivion*, and something of the sweeping majesty of Gaur Plain in *Xenoblade Chronicles*.

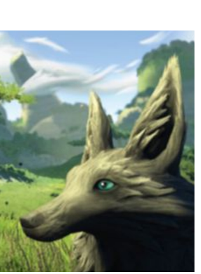
Herein lies one of the tensions at the heart of *Lost Ember*. It's a game designed to tell a linear story while offering room to explore the world – and from multiple perspectives, at that. Soon after we're done romping around in the grass, we head onwards, only to find an obstacle the wolf can't pass. A company of inquisitive moles sits nearby, and we find ourselves possessing one of them, the camera descending to a rather unflattering view of its hind quarters as it ambles forward before tunnelling beneath the obstruction. Later, we reach a cliff with an overhanging branch, upon which a group of parrots sits. A brief but exhilarating flight follows, as we plunge into a canyon amid the rest of our feathered kin.

How, we wonder, do you construct a world that needs to accommodate these very different creatures with their distinct methods of locomotion? "We build the rough environments first and then we add the animals," Graff tells us. "You can't always plan how it feels to fly through the environments with the parrot, for example, so we have to keep testing it. Because you're so fast with the bird, you often have to adjust the environment itself. So maybe you make a canyon a little longer or something, but it still has to be playable as a mole who's really small and slow. It's definitely a lot of work!"

There is, it turns out, another piece of design trickery involved. You can only stray a certain distance from animals of the same type, and you'll automatically revert back to the wolf when that happens. We discover this when we diverge from the assumed flight path and find ourselves plummeting earthward – albeit only after repeatedly ignoring an onscreen warning. To a point, freedom is illusory, then, though Graff insists you'll still be able to wander off and find secret areas and side stories that aren't part of the main narrative and navigate areas in multiple forms.

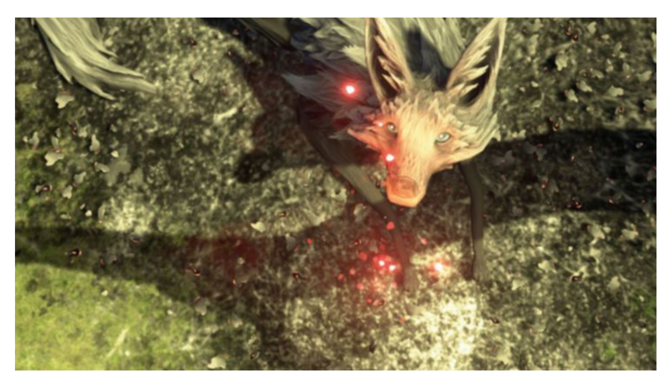
Incredibly, all of this is the work of just a handful of people. "There are five of us here in Hamburg and then two audio guys in Scotland, so seven in total," Graff says. But even after more than doubling its crowdfunding targets, the studio's plans haven't changed. "We don't want to blow everything up and then not be able to actually finish it," Graff explains. "We're still doing the same game and trying to not put too many new features in it just because we have some time now." A smart decision for a game that clearly demonstrates the value of limitations. ■

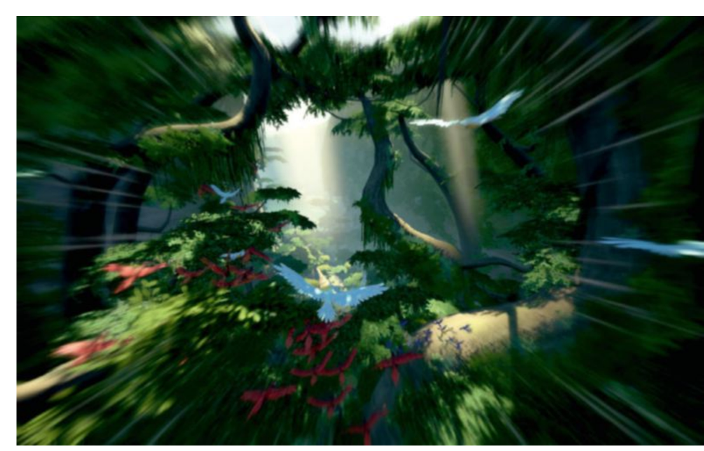




Wolf from the lore

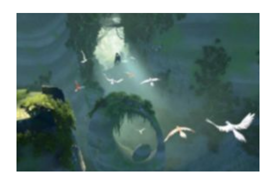
As our floating companion conjures a bridge to span a chasm, we're shown a fleeting glimpse of a lost civilisation, whose story is delivered in a portentous (and slightly hammy) voiceover. "From the beginning, we had this idea of animals exploring the story of mankind without man being present," Graff says. "We looked at a lot of different cultures and ended up liking the concept of an Incan or Mayan-based culture for our civilisation." This is the part of the game most likely to change between now and its release date in 2018. "It's still not completely finished," Graff admits. "We changed a lot of the story just a couple of months ago."





TOP The opening shows the wolf being woken by the soul of a man from a past civilisation. Exploring the world to relive his memories provides the main thrust of the narrative. RIGHT The studio studied recent Kickstarter successes before launching *Lost Ember*'s campaign. Graff spoke to *Everspace* developer Rockfish Games and even pledged towards the *Shadow Of The Colossus*-influenced *Prey For The Gods*. BELOW "We actually think of *Lost Ember* more as a console title," Graff says, even though the alpha build we play is on PC. "We always work with a gamepad in mind"







TOP There will be more animals to control, including fish and mountain goats. "We build each area and then decide what animals would fit there and give players a great experience," Graff says. ABOVE Controls have been deliberately kept simple to minimise the adjustment period for controlling each new animal





GET EVEN

Scary, minimalist, melancholic: this thriller is everything you wouldn't expect

Developer	The Farm 51
Publisher	Bandai Namco
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Poland
Release	2017

The first hour of *Get Even* – like, you would hope, the rest of the game – is difficult to define. It's scary, but not a horror. You have guns, but it isn't a shooter. **Lionel Lovisa**, the game's producer, whose previous credits include *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Peace Walker*, describes it as a "thriller". Though its locations are empty and sparse, its interactions bare and few, *Get Even* puts you on the edge of your seat.

"I'm expecting to have people hate the game because it's not a shooter, or it's not their kind of a game," Lovisa says. "I also expect to have people who say it's blown their minds. With something like *Call Of Duty*, you have reactions between, let's say, 70 and 100 – one way or another, people don't really complain about it. I expect *Get Even* will have a much bigger range of responses."

As Cole Black, a Sheffield-accented mercenary with, seemingly, a troubled past, your opening assignment is to rescue a kidnapped woman being held inside an abandoned school. *Get Even*'s slow, muted pace is immediately striking. There is no booming musical score, no horde of enemies, no protracted, jargon-heavy mission briefing. Accompanied only by the sounds of Black's breathing and of doors opening and closing somewhere inside the vast, dead building, you methodically work your way from the top floor to the basement. When you do encounter a guard, he's on the phone to his wife, explaining that he won't be home until late. Black takes a deep breath. The aim button slowly raises your pistol. You repeat an action learned from countless videogames, and the guard falls immediately dead. But it feels somehow wrong. Neither satisfying nor overtly melancholic, your first kill in *Get Even* is as cold and indifferent as the basement in which it takes place. The sound remains muted. There are no exotic blood effects. All you can hear is the guard's widow: "Hello? Hello?" Demonstrably, this game is messing with your head.

Created by Polish developer The Farm 51, *Get Even* almost capriciously toys with genre conventions. It builds up to jump scares, but they never quite arrive. A large-scale gunfight breaks out but it's unspectacular and over quickly. Compared to so many games, which take pride in their clarity and accessibility, when playing *Get Even*, you never quite know how you're supposed to feel. Similarly contrary and slowly paced games, such as *Firewatch* and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, foreground their themes, characters and emotional conceits. Big action titles live and die by their set-pieces. Between both these archetypes, ▶



Lionel Lovisa, producer



Neither a shooter nor a horror, *Get Even* is being described by its creators as a "thriller". Films such as Kill List and Session 9 are clear influences



Get Even treads a distinctive, intransigent line – so far, at least, it refuses to succumb to shooter, horror or dramatic conventions.

"Even if nothing is happening, a lot of things are happening," Lovisa explains. "You play for an hour and you don't do very much. But you'll feel like you've done a lot. You won't know what happens when you open the next door.

"You know, if we talk about *Uncharted*, for example, there you have a puzzle, then shooting, then adventure – it's puzzle time, then shooting time, then adventure time. Doing it like that, it's really easy to balance a game. With *Get Even*, it's different. There's a different feeling in almost every room. There are no two places where you'll experience the same rhythm. You don't know what's going to happen. That's what kind of game it is."

Independent games are often credited for their writing, their unpredictability, their unusualness; big-budget games are admired for their production values. But rarely do the two seem to combine. It's as if, over the past five to ten years, a line has been drawn in the sand, defining what certain kinds of games are allowed to do and to be. As it moves out of the abandoned school, into dream sequences, dialogue-heavy exploration sections and finally a lengthy shooting and sneaking mission, reminiscent of this year's *Deus Ex*, *Get Even* – consistently surprising, but nevertheless polished to modern, triple-A standards – feels like a rare example of a game that is prepared to straddle both independent and mainstream sensibilities. The Farm 51 has the equipment and know-how to create some technically accomplished mechanics and environments, but its comparatively small size allows it to experiment and challenge, too.

"With Get Even, it's different. There's a different feeling in almost every room"

"The Farm 51 has one of the biggest scanning rigs in Europe, used to 3D-scan real-world objects," Lovisa says. "We don't have 300 artists to make props, so scanning lets us get high-detail assets into the game. It's a double-edged sword, because it's getting very real. It looks like reality but it also doesn't – it's that uncanny valley effect. But we can also change things in this game in about half a day, make switches and put things in – or take them out – very quickly. You can't do that on a triple-A game. When I worked on 300-people projects, I'd have to talk to the director, who'd talk to the leader of the animation team, who'd talk to the animator, who had to find time in the schedule, and so on. Here, I talk to maybe two people and it's done. Will something work? Will it not work? The attitude is, 'I don't know, but let's put it in.' We haven't set a lot of expectations for the game, so we can experiment however we like."

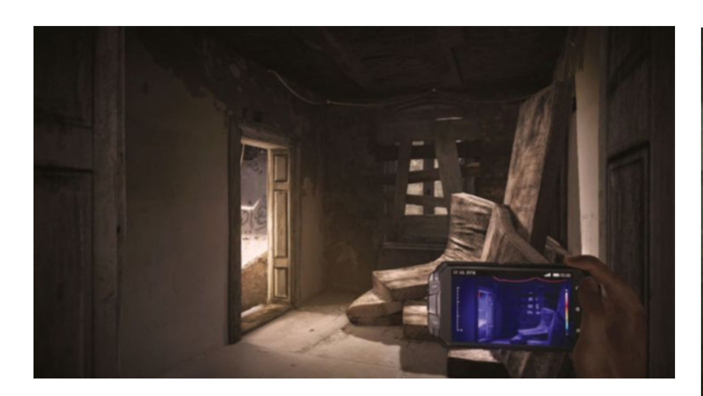
Its dialogue is occasionally clunky and there are a couple of humdrum sequences (a rotted old asylum, the patients of which are being used as military test subjects, is hackneyed), but the first hour is unlike any game released over the past decade. Perhaps that means it doesn't preview well – aside from its constantly shifting but always subtly uncomfortable atmosphere, there's no single thing by which *Get Even* can easily be defined. But its sparing and painfully contextualised flashes of violence are enough to turn your stomach. Its ability to lean, softly, into recognisable videogame elements makes it engaging. For the longest time, games have slotted themselves simply, eagerly, into genres. 'Shooter' is an easier sell than 'character drama'. 'Platformer' brings to consumers' minds a tangible, familiar product. If *Get Even* continues in its current vein – a high-end game without adherence to even the newest, most fashionable conventions – it will, at the very least, for critics, players and developers alike, be a talking point.

"A shooter we could do easily," Lovisa says. "A puzzle game we could do easily. When I came onto *Get Even* it wasn't well-balanced, but it had potential. It's not generic. It's dangerous. This game is quite expensive but it's also uncertain, at this point, how much people are going to like it. If it works, we can make more titles of this kind and scale. And right now, those are rare." ■



Farm fresh

Founded in 2005, Polish developer The Farm 51 is perhaps best known for *Hell & Damnation*, its reworking of the firstperson shooter *Painkiller*. Revealed in 2014, *Get Even* has been the studio's sole development project ever since. With backing from Bandai Namco, the 70-person team is trying to create a game that demonstrates its unique abilities. "Unlike a lot of studios today, we don't have 200 or 300 people," Lovisa explains. "We have to work with the resources that we have. However, the size of the team doesn't matter, really. It's about the quality you have in each sector. We don't try to cover what we're weak at; we try to play to what we're strong at."











TOP **Contrary to conventional videogame design logic, the opening mission is slow, quiet and very eerie. You feel uncertain from the start.** ABOVE **So far, the plot of *Get Even* is strange and opaque. It's unclear exactly which parts of the game are 'real' and which are not.** MAIN **You're aided in gunfights by the CornerGun, a prototype device that allows you to see and fire around bends, while remaining in cover**

TOP **Puzzles in *Get Even* are often solved using your character's mobile phone, which can gather evidence and shine a UV light beam.** RIGHT **Using 3D scanning technology, The Farm 51 has rendered dozens of detailed, plausible environments. What happens within them, however, is far from normal**



Developer
Team Ninja
Publisher
SIE (EU, US), Koei Tecmo (Japan)
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release February 8





NIOH

Team Ninja's Souls homage is looking like its best game in years

As elevator pitches go, '*Dark Souls* meets *Ninja Gaiden*' is almost irresistible. Especially in *Nioh*'s case, since it's the work of Team Ninja, latterday steward of the *Ninja Gaiden* series. Yet there's plenty of room for concern amid the optimism. *Gaiden* has, since the departure of controversial figurehead Tomonobu Itagaki, lost its way somewhat. Team Ninja's stock has fallen, the days when it was considered among the finest developers of action games on the planet long gone. After the lacklustre *Ninja Gaiden 3* came the forgettable *Dead Or Alive 5* and the gender-politics scandal of *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 3*. As for the other half of the equation? *Souls* clones don't tend to go so well, as evidenced by Deck13's forgettable 2013 action-RPG *Lords Of The Fallen*.

While the Souls influence runs deep, there are enough new ideas here for it to stand out

Happily, there's a tremendous amount to be positive about in *Nier*. This is the work of the Team Ninja of old, a slick, satisfying, violent action game that seeks to test the wits. Given the improvements made between *Nioh*'s alpha and beta phases, its maker is willing to listen to its fans' feedback, rather than simply pander to their baser instincts. And while the *Souls* influence runs deep in *Nioh*'s DNA – bonfire-like shrines in worlds patrolled by pockets of tough enemies, currency retrievable from your bloodstain, co-op partners that can be summoned when you're struggling – there are enough new ideas here for it to stand out on its own.

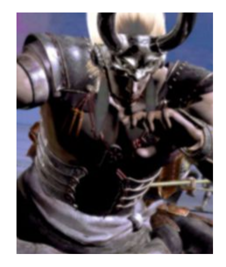
Some of them do have their roots in other games, but such is the way of game development. Combat involves a three-stance system that evokes *Nidhogg* and *For Honor*, but is a question of the speed, not the angle, of your attacks. Low stance delivers fast, light attacks; high the slowest and strongest; and middle is, well, somewhere between the two. As in the *Souls* games, your actions are governed by a stamina bar, here styled as Ki. As you spend Ki by attacking, the bar will briefly glimmer blue; tap R1 during this phase and you'll trigger a Ki Pulse, automatically regaining a chunk of meter in a system that recalls *Gears Of War*'s active reload. The *Souls* games have always involved paying careful attention to your stamina bar, but this takes it a step further, and adds consequence to ignoring it. Should your Ki be drained, your avatar will stop and bend down to catch his breath, leaving himself wide open to attack.

The protagonist in question is an English samurai, William Adams, in a fantasy version of Japan's Sengoku period in the early 17th century – an honest expression of the developer's intent to make a game that's culturally relevant to its home country, while also appealing in the west. While the *Souls* games use western medieval fantasy for their settings, *Nioh*'s is embedded deeply in Japanese history and folklore. William Adams is recruited by legendary Sengoku ninja Hattori Hanzo, and charged with ridding the world of yokai – a handy catch-all term for ghosts, monsters, demons and spirits – while also battling with human enemies as he pursues the ninja who brought him to Japan.

Based on an abandoned Akira Kurosawa script, it's as intriguing for its narrative as it is its action, and it's perhaps little surprise that Sony has picked up the publishing rights for *Nioh* in Europe and the US. It's a standard-bearer for PS4 Pro, too: two modes, Action and Movie, adjust framerate and visuals to the player's tastes, and on Pro that means a choice between 4K at 30fps, 1080p at 60fps, or 1080p with advanced visual effects at 30fps.

Its influences may be obvious, and its developer's reputation not what it used to be, but from what we've seen, *Nioh* looks like an awful lot more than the sum of its parts. ■





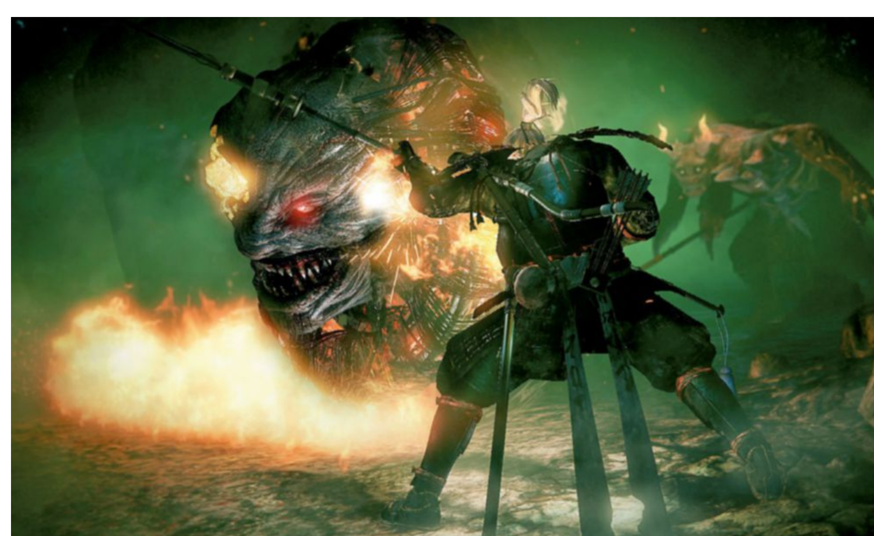
Samurai lowdown

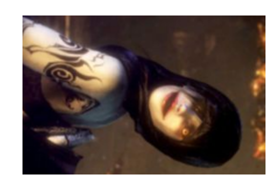
Nioh was announced way back in 2004 as a spinoff to a film, Oni, based on Kurosawa's unfinished script. To put that in context, publisher Koei, which had yet to merge with Tecmo, said the game would be coming to "the successor to PS2", since PlayStation 3 had yet to be unveiled. Beginning life as a JRPG, it was later handed to *Dynasty Warriors* developer Omega Force. Team Ninja first got involved in 2010, assisting Omega Force with *Nioh*'s action component, but the higher-ups weren't happy. Team Ninja gained full control of the project in 2012, its staff's love of FromSoftware's *Souls* games turning *Nioh* into what it is today.

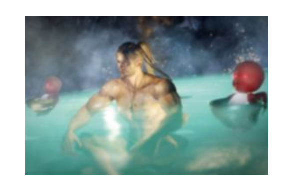




TOP ***Nioh*'s not all about boss battles: the rank and file out on the street can be just as punishing. Team Ninja had to substantially change a regular enemy in the alpha whose near-instant attack was a one-hit-kill.**
RIGHT **The game changed substantially between its alpha and beta phases, the fan pushback against overly strict weapon durability causing Team Ninja to remove the feature entirely.**
BELOW **For some players, online co-op will be crucial when facing down these gigantic bosses. In the beta, you could only offer your services to another player after you'd cleared the level yourself, something we'd like to see changed in the game's final release**





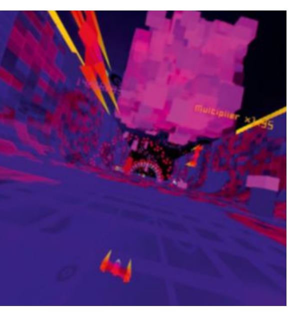


TOP **While the supernatural element is based in folklore, weapons and armour are properly grounded in the history of the Sengoku period. Since samurai didn't use shields, there are none to be found in the game.**
ABOVE **The protagonist is based on William Adams, the first Englishman to reach Japan and, later, the first western samurai. In *Nioh* he travels to Japan in search of an enemy; in reality he was a mere employee of the Dutch East India Company**





Developer/publisher Llamasoft
Format PS4, PSVR
Origin UK
Release 2017



POLYBIUS

Jeff Minter's quest to induce trance states in play continues in VR

The apocryphal *Polybius* arcade machine was said to induce amnesia and bouts of night terrors. It's something of a relief, then, to find that developer Jeff Minter isn't interested in replicating any of the urban legend's defining characteristics in his PSVR game of the same name, and is, in fact, working to avoid inflicting psychological distress altogether.

Which is probably why *Polybius* feels so comfortable to play, despite our early fears after seeing the first videos of this psychedelic conglomerate of retro arcade aesthetics and farm stock thundering past at what appeared to be an entirely unreasonable speed. Strapped into the HMD, however, and surrounded by Minter's surreal vision, the effect is one of trance-inducing relaxation.

Rather than enemies coming to you, you're perpetually moving forward into the level

That's not to say it's devoid of challenge. While Minter tells us he's dialled down the difficulty for early showings, there's still plenty to do. Anyone who's played his earlier work should settle in quickly: hold X to fire a stream of lasers while you move left and right across variously shaped pathways, avoiding or destroying obstacles as you go. Here, though, rather than enemies coming to you, you're perpetually moving forward into the level. Some stages see you rotating around the inside or outside of a cylinder, others are 'U' shapes with impassable edges, and still more trace gentle curves across the screen.

Each surface is populated by a riot of colourful things to shoot, including bouncing polygonal balls, bright red obelisks, and creatures that look suspiciously like Space Invaders. In among them, a pair of dotted lines trace an optimal (though also optional) path through the noise punctuated by gates that look like a pair of tusks set into the ground. Each one you successfully pass through will provide a little kick of speed until you're hurtling along at an unnerving pace, while giant bouncing pills offer up score bonuses and powerups – including one that sets everything into slow motion for a time. Your score multiplier is directly tied to how fast you're travelling, and clipping the sides of gates or any indestructible scenery – which is introduced with greater frequency as you move into later levels – will reset your speed to what feels like a comparative crawl and cost you one shield, the equivalent of a life.

While there are some subtle variations to your main weapon (one sees your barrage split into two streams, the first of which fires directly in front while the other reacts to the geometry of the level by curving across inclines), we struggle to notice it changing much during our demo. This is partly down to the fact that most enemies burst with a single hit, meaning that you feel pretty powerful from the outset. Minter doesn't want to create too much friction, however – the game is at its best when you're flowing through its rapidly changing collages, and losing speed recalls the disheartening jolt of hitting the trackside in the original *Wipeout*.

This sense of unbounded progression is underscored by a second type of gate, also introduced in later levels, that throws you into the air for a second or two. You'll score more points for everything you destroy while aloft, and each hit will briefly reduce your rate of descent, keeping you airborne for longer.

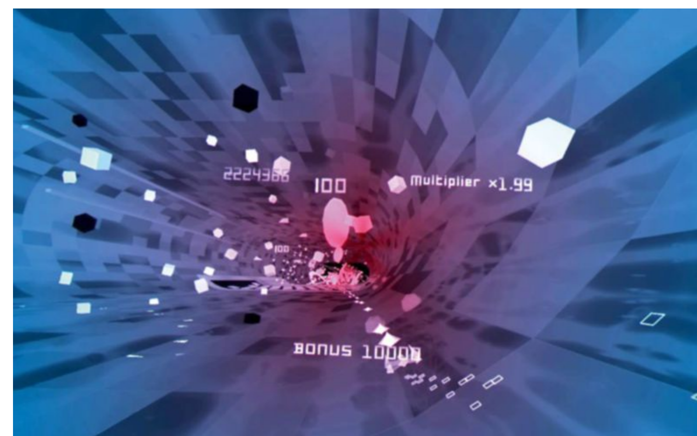
Polybius doesn't make any particular gameplay case for VR, and it can be played on a TV screen, too. But the pleasure of being enveloped by Minter's irrepressibly cheerful digital narcotic is such that using a headset just feels like the right thing to do. With *Rez*, PSVR has already given new life and context to one trip-pedalling auteur's work, and with *Polybius* the process looks set to repeat. ■

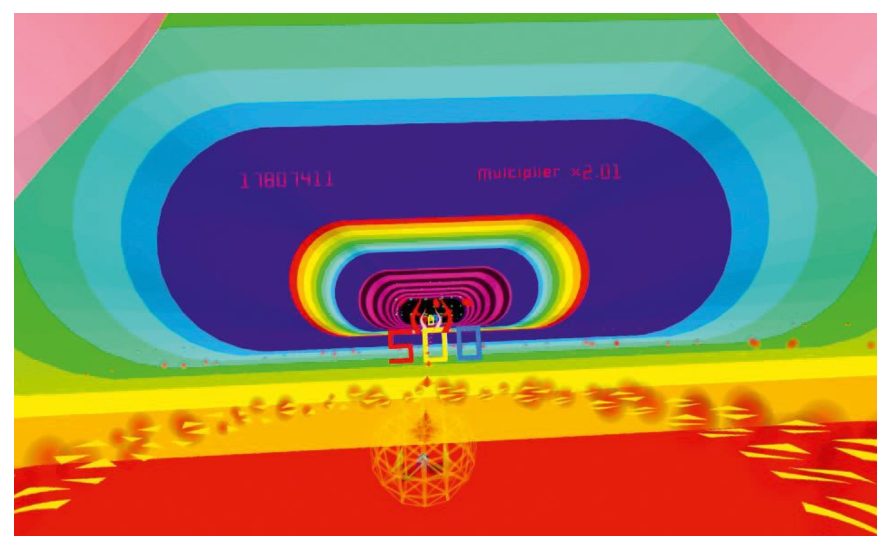


Swear down

The legend of the *Polybius* arcade machine includes the notion that the game was built to influence players behaviourally, triggering something within them by using subliminal messages. Minter's game also features subliminal messages, but they're benign and not particularly well-hidden. However, he tells us that in an earlier build they were much harder to spot, and as a result he had to point out some colourful language to Sony's QA team. In the interests of keeping things family-friendly, he has since removed anything that might have caused offence.

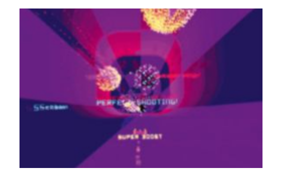




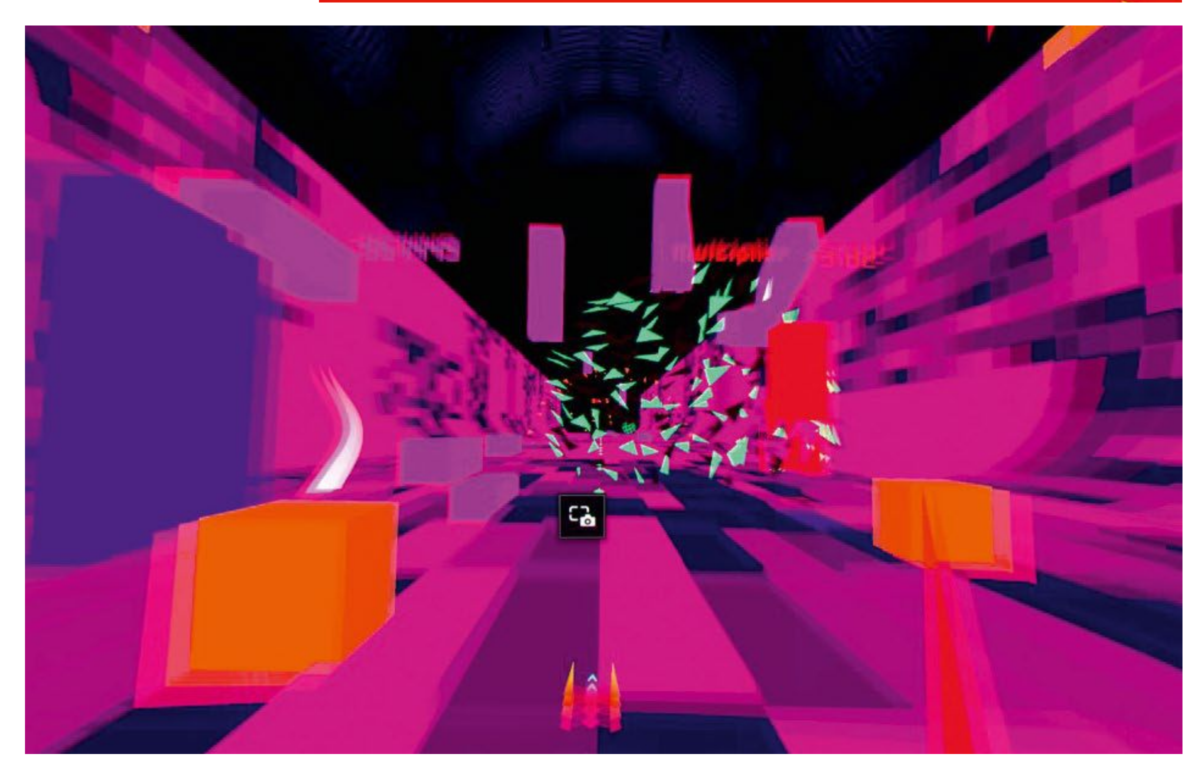


TOP **Despite initially seeming chaotic, each level has been scripted by Minter to control the ebb and flow of enemies and obstacles. Learning them will take some time, though.** RIGHT **While *Polybius*'s bold colours and swift pace can become rather intense, the effect is actually more soothing than stressful.** BELOW **Some obstacles can't be destroyed and have to be avoided, meaning that close attention must be paid to colour-coding as the levels become ever more crowded**



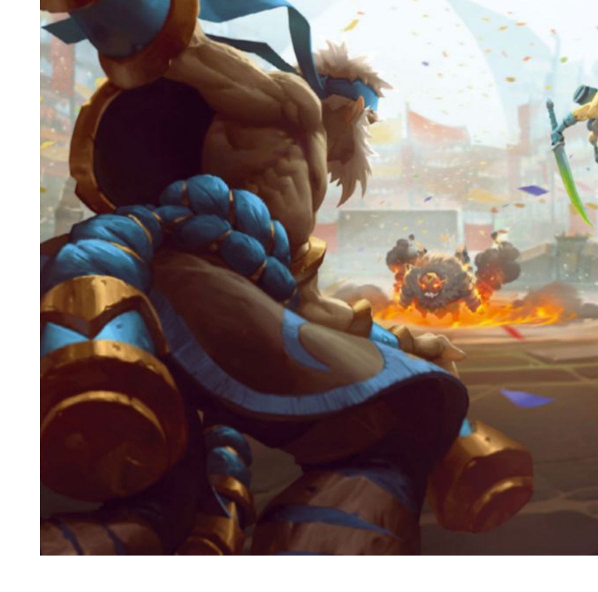


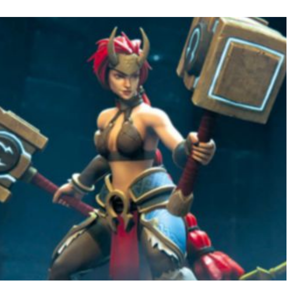
TOP **The only time that the *Polybius* demo gently tests our stomachs is when we perform loops around the inside of its tubular levels.** ABOVE **Minter's beloved floaty text feels at home in VR as the game continually hurls encouraging messages at you as you blast away**





Developer/ publisher Stunlock Studios
Format PC
Origin Sweden
Release 2017





BATTLERITE

This indie arena battler challenges the biggest games in the genre

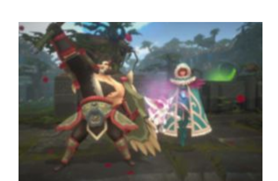
Battlerite launched on Steam Early Access in September and quickly became one the fastest-selling games on the platform, an impressive achievement for a multiplayer-only indie game from a small studio with only a few credits to its name. It's a competitive action RPG that mixes elements of MOBAs, fighting games and MMOG player-vs-player combat. Small teams of two or three heroes with distinct abilities are thrust into battle in a fantasy coliseum. The team that manages to wipe out the other wins the round, with the first team to win three rounds winning the match. This format is familiar to *Battlerite*'s developer, Stunlock: it's a recipe the studio pioneered with its first game, *Bloodline: Champions*, back in 2011.

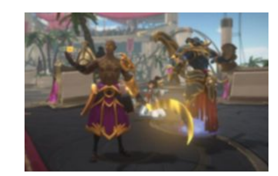
"*Bloodline* never took off as a huge commercial success, but it was a huge success for us as a studio," marketing director **Johan Ilves** tells us. "It was our first game and started out as a student project, a very ambitious project for a group of 14 students. We always believed in what we started back in 2008. It was the only skill-based PvP arena game of its kind, and five years after release there was still no new game like it."

Bloodline earned a small yet passionate community but Stunlock didn't have the resources – particularly in terms of server infrastructure – to support multiplayer beyond a certain scale. Its next game was tie-in MOBA *Dead Island: Epidemic*, which was made for Deep Silver but cancelled in October 2015. Fully independent once again, Stunlock turned its focus back to *Bloodline: Champions*. "It felt," Ives says, "like unfinished business."

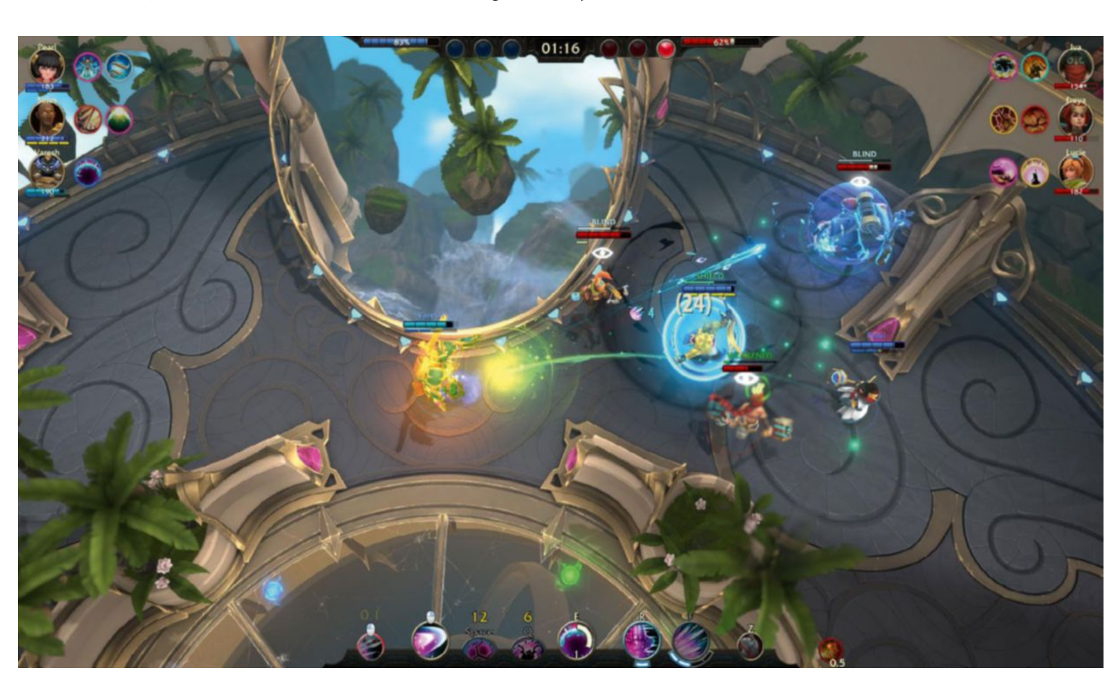
For the long-term fan, *Battlerite*'s success stems from the way it raises the skill ceiling of lots of familiar mechanics. As in a MOBA,

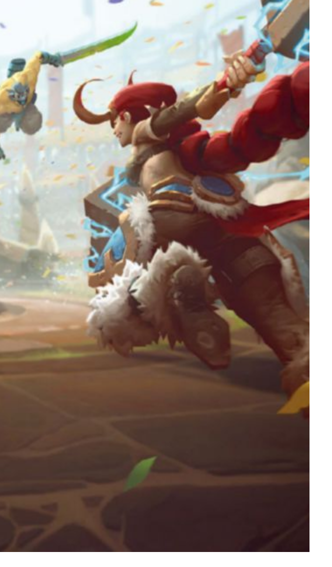
Extra effects such as stuns, roots, slows and fire are communicated through text, but it'll still take some time to learn which characters can do what – and what it looks like when they do





ABOVE **Many different character pairings can work – not just traditional combos such as healers and tanks. A pair of mages approach the arena very differently to two assassins, for example**







LEFT **Powerups spawn regularly in the centre of the arena, making this open area a vital – but highly dangerous – battleground. Gaining an advantage requires careful use of abilities and good aim**



TOP LEFT **Character designs emphasise strong silhouettes and easy recognisability: at present, there are no cosmetic items or skins that stray too far from the colourful fantasy aesthetic.** ABOVE **Effective range varies hugely between characters, although champions with long-range damage usually pay for it with reduced mobility. In *Battlerite*, being able to reposition quickly is often vital**

you have an array of skills mitigated by cooldowns; unlike most MOBAs, however, these abilities are manually aimed, and many require perfect timing and judgement to achieve their full potential – such as shields that can reflect projectiles, or teleports that can be reversed to return you to your original location if the situation demands it.

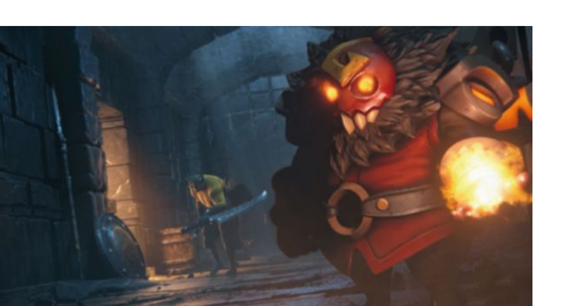
Each character also generates energy by dealing damage and securing powerups around the arena. A full energy bar grants you access to your hero's most powerful ability. Yet energy can also be spent on EX variants of regular powers, which adds a strategic element to ability use akin to *Street Fighter*. There is a lot going on in any given moment, and much to learn.

Despite this, accessibility has been a priority for Stunlock since the beginning – making the formula work for newcomers was the biggest hurdle the studio sought to overcome. "It's definitely been a challenge," Ilves says. "At its core there are a lot of delicate elements that we've worked on to reduce the [skill] threshold. We put a lot of effort into audio, visuals and general feedback to make every move and every attack easy to read. When you hit someone, or when you get hit by something, you should always be able to understand the impact of that attack and learn from it."

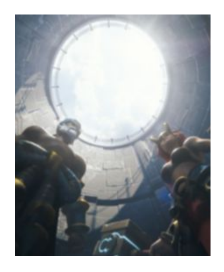
A substantial tutorial introduces concepts in a safe environment, and when you graduate to playing against others the matchmaking system does its best to ensure that you're pitched against other newcomers. *Battlerite*'s focus on combat helps, too: there's no map-wide strategic level to consider as there would be in a MOBA. This means that, as in *Street Fighter*, it's possible for new players to trade blows and have fun even if they're not maximising the potential of their characters.

> ***"We've always been confident, but no one expected it to take off this quickly"***

The elimination format is a natural generator of dramatic setpieces, and colourful powers are fun to experiment with. Every character in the Early Access version is available for free, and this allows each player to find their comfort zone. The net result is a complex game that has resonated with more people, more quickly, than was forecast. "We've always been confident in *Battlerite*, but no one expected it to take off this quickly," Ilves says. At the time of writing, almost 400,000 people have played the game on Steam. While its accessible design is no doubt a factor in its popularity, another is how fully fledged it feels. More characters are planned before the arrival of version 1.0 early next year, and Stunlock is promising to overhaul ranked play before full release. It may still be in development, but the game already feels as good as complete – a fact attested to by the thousands playing it – which is a breath of fresh air on Steam Early Access. ■



Ashka is a good example of *Battlerite*'s hybrid character design: a mage on paper, his ability to transform into a molten fist provides reasons to engage up close



Virtual fighter

Stunlock plans to use VR to support esports. A spectator using Vive will be able to access an immersive firstperson camera that allows you to take in battles from above or even sit in the crowd and watch from the sidelines. VR can also be used by video makers and broadcasters. Multiple camera operators can feed video to a producer in realtime, offering a variety of perspectives on the action that isn't often found in esports. Where other game broadcasters have to contend with massive maps, here one or two camera operators can easily cover a small, clearly laid out arena.

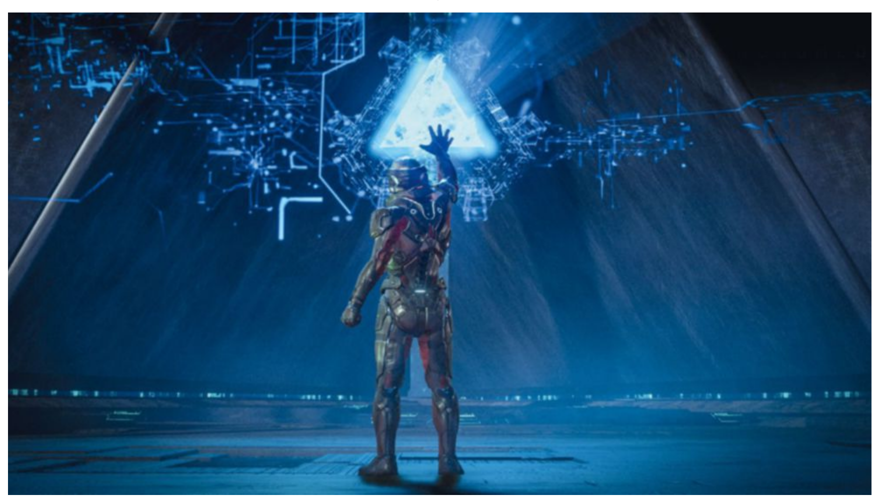




ROUNDUP

MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

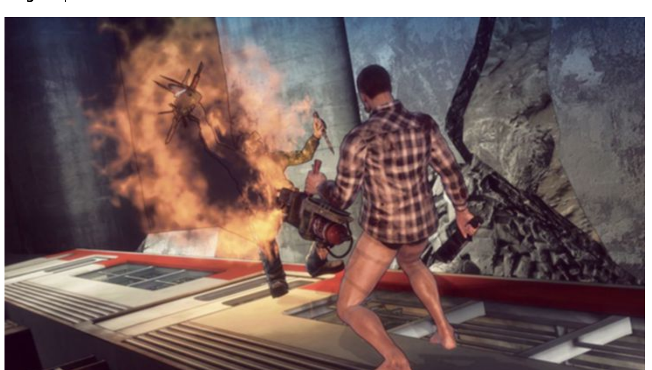
Developer BioWare **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Canada **Release** March



After a curiously quiet marketing campaign, the next in BioWare's spacebound RPG series is at last in near-Earth orbit. One potential explanation for the relative silence around *Andromeda* is that this is a very difficult game: where do you go after *Mass Effect 3*, whose ending seemed so final, and which sparked such furore from its so-called fans? The answer is a new galaxy (the titular Andromeda), a new pair of protagonists (siblings Scott and Sara Ryder), and a more analogue style of dialogue response. That aside, it's largely business as usual, though we don't blame BioWare for seeing avoiding more death threats as its priority.

LET IT DIE

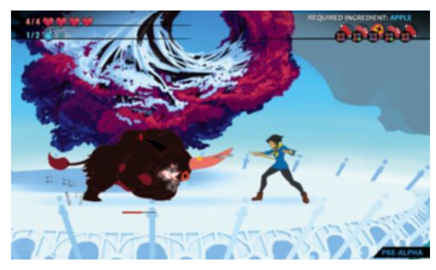
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** GungHo Online Entertainment **Format** PS4
Origin Japan **Release** 2016



What happens when Grasshopper Manufacture's lo-fi, punk-ish development style meets *Puzzle & Dragons* maker GungHo's well-stocked coffers? What do you do with all that budget when 'rough round the edges' is practically the studio's motto? Turns out you spend it on the voice cast. Verne 'Mini-Me' Troyer, retired pornstar Traci Lords, and Star Wars legends Mark Hamill and Billy Dee Williams are the stars atop a game that already sounded camper than Christmas.

BATTLE CHEF BRIGADE

Developer/publisher Trinket Studios
Format PC **Origin** US **Release** TBA



Here's an odd recipe for an RPG: a girl on her way to culinary stardom who cooks with a match-three puzzler, harvests ingredients with side-scrolling combat, and tries to earn enough to pay the rent. Placeholder assets are the only sour note in a delicious blend of seemingly disparate design ideas.

THE SIGNAL FROM TÖLVA

Developer/publisher Big Robot
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** 2017



Where next for Big Robot after *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*? To a faraway planet, it turns out, where robot factions explore the remains of a long-gone civilisation. So, yes, more robots – but there's nary a top hat in sight in a sharp stylistic turn for the studio, powered by former Rockstar artist Ian McQue.

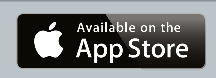
GRAVITY RUSH 2

Developer SIE Japan Studio, Project Siren **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** January 18



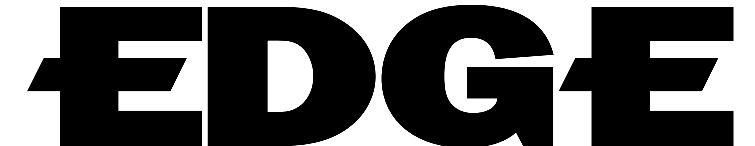
Originally due in December, Project Siren's sequel was delayed for 'quality purposes'. But going gold with time to spare affirms our suspicion Sony was just clearing space after *The Last Guardian*'s final delay. Still, there's not long to wait for Kat's delightful-looking return to a much-changed Hekseville.


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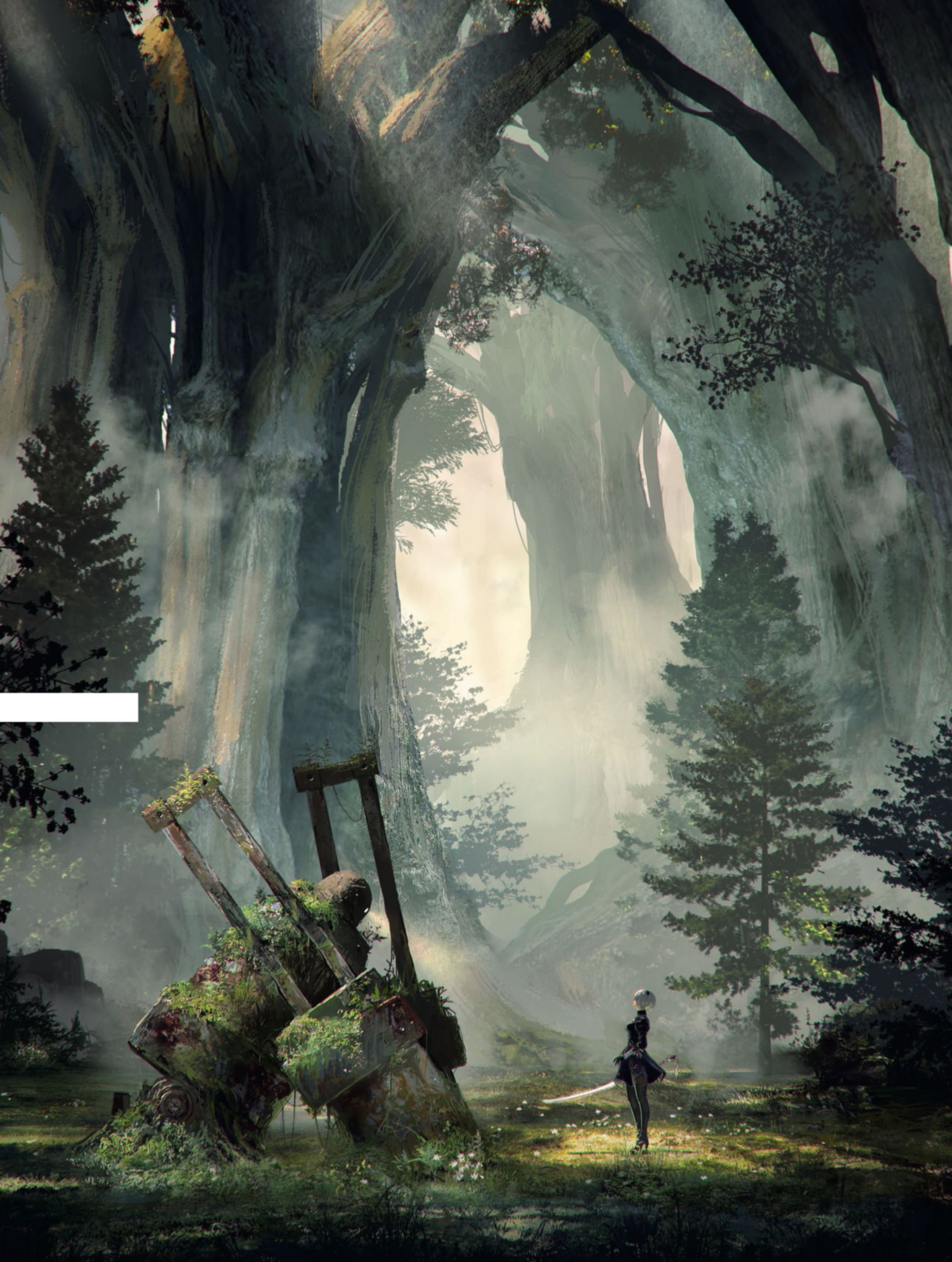
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M A C H I N E _ L E A R N I N G

Game *Nier: Automata*
Developer PlatinumGames
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4
Release February (Japan), TBA (ROW)



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We were warned this might happen. *Nier: Automata* director **Taro Yoko** has got his mask on. This time, it's a literal one, a grinning face on a grey, moon-shaped head, a replica of that belonging to Emil, a young boy NPC in the original *Nier* who is cursed with Medusa-like powers. Yoko isn't wearing a mask because he's worried about turning us to stone, of course. But this is just the most obvious confirmation of a man who would prefer to avoid the limelight. At dinner the night before our visit to PlatinumGames, he half-jokes repeatedly about not being needed at the studio the following day. He mentions that his wife, an artist, is more famous than he is – she created the iconic characters in Namco drumming game *Taiko No Tatsujin* – and it seems he prefers it that way. During interviews at the studio, he is bashful and modest, deflecting questions by saying the credit should be given to another member of the team. He's only just put his mask on, but in a sense, it's like he's been wearing one the whole time.

There are advantages to working in the shadows, admittedly. The original *Nier*, released in 2010, was an ethereal, melancholy, thoroughly odd action RPG that played a lot of tricks on the player. The most devious of all came at the end of your fourth playthrough, when the protagonist was faced with a choice: sacrifice himself, or watch a cursed friend die. If you chose the former, your save file was deleted. It's the kind of idea that any self-respecting producer would shoot down on sight. So Yoko kept it hidden from his higher-ups until it was too late to change it. It takes a QA team a while to burn through four playthroughs, after all.

Yoko, inevitably, won't say if *Nier: Automata* contains something similar. But he's certainly in a position to pull it off; while the original game was made by now-defunct studio Cavia, which like Square Enix was based in Tokyo, he's making this game over 300 miles away in Osaka. Little wonder Square Enix is keeping a close eye on a man who producer **Yosuke Saito** describes as a "weirdo". "I'm in Tokyo," Saito says, "but I'm online every single day, and I think I send more messages to him than I do to my girlfriend. And he talks to me more than he talks to his wife."

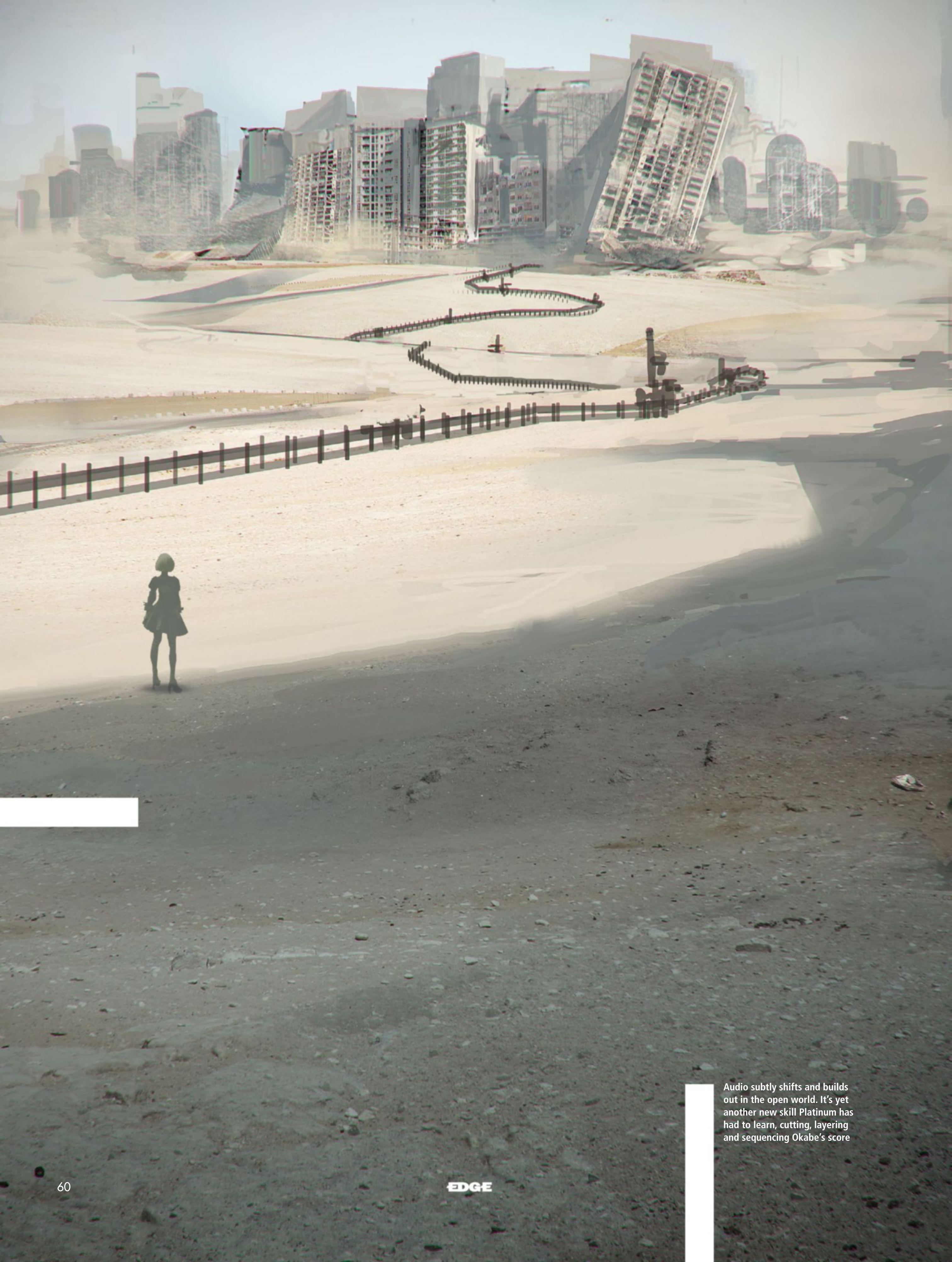


Yoko may be the director, but the project is Saito's baby. As producer on the original game, he recalls receiving an email from a member of senior Square Enix staff documenting all the things that would need to be fixed in the event of a sequel. The message came from Yosuke Matsuda, who at the time was the company's chief financial officer. These days, he is its president. With support for a sequel from the highest echelon of Square Enix's orgchart, Saito set about assembling his dream team. Naturally, Yoko would direct. Keiichi ▶









Audio subtly shifts and builds out in the open world. It's yet another new skill Platinum has had to learn, cutting, layering and sequencing Okabe's score

Okabe, the musician whose compositions provided so much of the emotional backdrop for the first game, was another obvious hire. One of *Nier*'s laundry list of little problems was its split personality – enforced, it seems, by marketing teams in the US. Feeling that the tale of a brother caring for his younger sister would fail to resonate with their target audience, they insisted that the game instead be about a father caring for his daughter in the western release. Seeking a strong, uniform identity for the sequel's cast, Saito brought on longtime *Final Fantasy* character designer Akihiko Yoshida to design the protagonists – a group of androids tasked with saving the world from an invading race of robots – and their supporting cast.

Yet *Nier*'s biggest problem was its combat, an unrefined mish-mash of two-button melee fighting and JRPG-style magical attacks. "The one area I felt really needed to be improved was the gameplay itself," Saito says. "We decided that we were going to approach PlatinumGames. They are renowned as being craftsmen of action games. They are so dedicated and detailed in their game-making. I thought they were going to turn us down."

Evidently they did not, though **Atsushi Inaba**, the co-founder of PlatinumGames who also acts as producer, overseeing development in Osaka, admits that he was a little wary at first. "Yoko-san is rather an, um, iconoclastic guy," says Inaba – a man who, lest we forget, shares an office with Hideki Kamiya. "But when I first spoke with him he said to me, 'Look, I work in this very strange way. But these are the things I think I do well, and these are the things I don't do well'. He understands that he isn't orthodox in a number of ways, and because of that, people can trust him. He trusts the staff on his team, and they trust him, because he's honest."

The result is a project that, for all concerned, is in equal part opportunity and risk. For Square Enix it means sending one of its loosest cannons 300 miles away to a studio the publisher has never worked with before, and bankrolling a sequel to a game whose sales could charitably be described as modest. For Platinum, it means lending one of its teams to a self-confessedly oddball director, and making a game in a genre in which it has never previously worked. Yet the potential benefits are enormous. Square Enix gets a game with an action component made by the best in the business, while Platinum spreads its wings, ending a decade of making linear action games by building its first open world and RPG. No wonder Inaba talks about the importance of trust.

Still, from what we've seen, the gamble has paid off. Especially if you accept the premise that the only thing that really needed fixing from the first *Nier* was what happened during battles. This is the slick, immediate, immeasurably satisfying melee action that Platinum has made its calling card, its template instantly familiar to anyone with experience of the studio's prior work. Yet while Platinum has kept the lights on during its decade in business by primarily making games for fans of the niche character-action genre, things have had to change here. *Nier: Automata* is not merely a game for Platinum's core audience, but also for fans of the first title, RPG players who might not be interested in often punishingly difficult realtime combat. Then there is the potential audience of players who might never have played an action RPG before at all.

"What we've been keeping in mind when developing the action component is making sure it feels really comfortable, really good to play; that you don't get stuck or frustrated by the controls," says **Takahisa Taura**, the PlatinumGames designer heading up *Nier: Automata*'s battle system, whose previous credits include *The Wonderful 101* and *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. "As this is an RPG, if we went too far with the action and made it too difficult for people who don't know action games, it wouldn't have the right balance. We're having to take good control over that."

The most extreme consequence of that is Auto mode, which is only available on the lowest difficulty setting. Tap L2 and a halo appears below the protagonist to signal that you can pretty much just look on while a screenful of robots gets slashed to smithereens, the 'pod' drone companion firing ordnance without your instruction. It will even dodge for you, too. It's not fully automatic – our brief play with it suggests you have to keep enemies in view if they're to be reacted to, though we'll admit to turning it off within seconds. We're not its target audience, after all.

Some will value this helping hand, admittedly – at least at the start. The fact that Auto mode can be toggled on or off on the fly suggests that Platinum hopes that even the novices will, before long, want to take matters into their own hands. "The idea is that you just play normally," Yoko says, "then whenever you come up against a section where the action's a bit difficult, switch it on. That said, if you try to use it in the really frantic moments of the game, you'll just get beaten up."

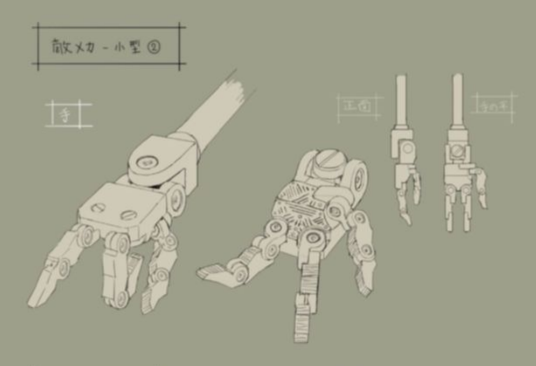
Those frantic moments will, at least, be less frequent sights than in Platinum's other games. The transition to an open world has meant the studio has had to rethink not just the difficulty of its action but its pacing, too. Game ▶

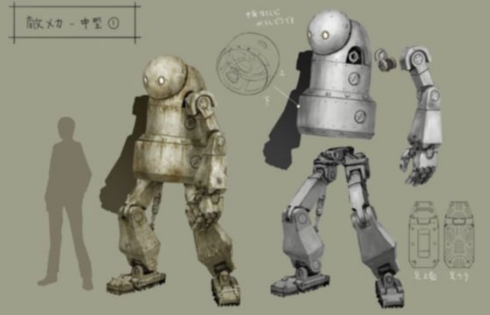
















designer **Isao Negishi**, who is heading up the creation of the RPG side of the game while Taura focuses on the action, explains: "In an action game, you have quite a dense collection of enemies. You'll defeat those, the barrier is destroyed, you go onto the next area and there's another big battle. When I first started placing enemies in *Nier: Automata*, I thought about it in the same way, having very high concentrations of enemies, these big battles." Yoko intervened, saying open worlds needed more room to breathe; more time between battles, and fights against smaller groups spreading out the bigger fights. "It feels really good now," Negishi says. "You've got these sections where you can just go through and enjoy the scenery. It's a different balance, and a new experience for us."

Platinum fans needn't worry about the studio's renewed focus on accessibility, though. Auto mode is, after all, only available on Easy difficulty; at the other end of the scale is Very Hard, where every enemy and bullet in the game will kill you in one hit. And mechanically this is every inch the Platinum game. While the studio's reputation may have been built in a single genre, its real calling card is a single button. Ever since Bayonetta's Witch Time, which rewarded a well-timed right-trigger dodge by slowing time to a crawl for a few seconds of threat-free damage dealing, a squeeze of the right trigger has defined the studio's output. Here, as tradition dictates, it performs a mostly invincible cartwheel away from an incoming attack. Time it perfectly, however, and the outcome changes depending on the next button press – knocking an opponent away, or up into the air, or firing a damaging laser burst if you press the pod's fire button. As ever with a Platinum production, a properly timed press of R2 is the most satisfying thing in the game. But never has its result been this flexible.

It's a recurring theme, Platinum taking the ethos of an RPG character build and applying it to the game's combat system. You can carry multiple pods, each firing a different type of ordnance – a machine gun, a laser, a volley of homing missiles, a grapple wire that zooms you towards a foe, and many more besides. All can be switched between in realtime, an extension of Platinum's dual-melee weapon system, which also returns here. Program Chips, meanwhile, are dropped by enemies or found out in the world, granting new techniques, abilities and tweaks. Together they offer an intriguing level of control over your core moveset.

A bar on the menu screen shows the android protagonist's memory stack, which limits how many Chips can be assigned at once, an essential balancing act amid all that flexibility. Not all Chips are combat focused: some change the amount of information shown on the HUD, others boost your basic stats, and some are there for comedy value (making enemies emit a silly scream upon death, for instance). But the hardcore action fan can bin all those and fill their memory pool with combat Chips, while those at the other end of the spectrum have similar freedom to shape the game around their own skill levels and tastes. It's a system that shows, better than any other, the tightrope Platinum and Square Enix are walking in making a game that seeks to appeal to Platinum's action- ▶



Structurally, Yoko says the closest comparison is *Ocarina Of Time*, with battles in place of dungeons. We don't recall Link showing this much thigh



"YOU'VE GOT THESE SECTIONS WHERE YOU CAN JUST GO THROUGH AND ENJOY THE SCENERY. IT'S A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR US"



Yoko likes playing with the camera: one side-scrolling section zooms out absurdly far to show off the environment

game veterans, Square Enix's fanbase of RPG diehards, and absolute novices the world over.

If Yoko's feeling the pressure, he's not showing it. He's still pulling his little tricks, in fact. While demonstrating the dual-weapon system, Taura shows us a move that's only possible when you have a greatsword and heavy gauntlets equipped. Our heroine, an android named 2B, throws a gauntlet into the air, then swings the sword at it like a baseball bat. If it connects it sends an opponent flying and melts away their health bar. But it misses more often than it hits, and for a moment we wonder how the designer of *Nier: Automata*'s action component can be so, well, bad at it. "Originally, this attack hit every time," he tells us. "But Mr Yoko had this weird bit of inspiration and said, 'No, you've got to make it a percentage thing, where sometimes you miss." Now, it's entirely random.

It's this sort of idea that marks Yoko out in his field – not just in terms of its cruel playfulness, but because these are the details over which he obsesses. Taura and Negishi point out that, unlike Platinum's rigorously controlling internal directors, Yoko is a hands-off boss, setting high-level goals and letting the team decide how to implement them, interjecting every so often with some mad little idea. "Well, I don't want to work too much, you see," he says. "People tell me the things I point out are always odd things to be worried about: 'Why are you getting angry about that? Shouldn't you be focusing on something else?'"

Yet these details define Yoko's work. A director busying himself with the nuts and bolts of the combat or questing system, for instance, might not have time to come up with some of the sharp turns into leftfield that made *Nier* so well loved among those who actually played it. And while he talks about his overwhelming desire to make a game anyone can enjoy, it is his responsibility to ensure that the game remains spiritually *Nier*, despite being made by a completely different team.



Most of that will come from the story, which Yoko has written alone. Yet we're worried, and tell him so. The first *Nier* was, whichever version you played, a human tale; of a brother caring for his sister, or a father for his daughter. It was an emotional game, its melancholy born of its humanity. Yet *Nier: Automata* is, as its title suggests, a tale of machines, where a group of man-made androids save the planet from an invading race of robot aliens. As principal protagonist 2B sprints through an abandoned factory, her pod tells her how happy it is to have some company on a mission, since it's used to working alone. "We're not allowed to have emotions," 2B replies. "Get lost." What room is there for sentimentality in a game whose protagonists have been programmed specifically not to feel anything?

"It's the opposite," Yoko insists. "You really will see the emotional relationships and struggles of these robotic characters, and that adds another level to it." He loads into a settlement, a network of huts, bridges and ladders in a forest populated by the same robot enemies we were slicing up a few minutes earlier. They're peaceful – cowardly, even, one begging us not to kill it as we run past. "The robots aren't just mindless enemies; they're living, feeling creatures too. It's the core of the story. You find out why some of these alien robots are enemies, and why some of them are peaceful; how they relate to each other, and where these human-built androids fit into that.

"The last game was focused on some very sad, melancholy themes. I wanted to move slightly away from that, and have a slightly more hopeful feeling this time. I don't like to do the same thing twice – it's not really my thing. But I think one of the core themes which is shared by both games is how an individual lives their life, how they find meaning and a way to survive in an unfair situation where the odds are stacked against them."

Unfair like, say, deleting your save file? The drive for accessibility means that is unlikely to happen again, but there's a twinkle in Yoko's eye when we ask – in vain, inevitably – if he has anything similar up his sleeve this time. He confirms that the story is still based around multiple playthroughs, and tells us that there are many more possible endings this time. For now, the rest will remain a mystery.

Yet what is already clear is that this is a rare sort of collaboration, a risky endeavour from a publisher of big-budget games that looks like it is going to pay off, and improve not just the game but the people that made it. It means Platinum – which staff privately admit has made too many similar games in the past, sometimes too quickly, to the detriment of their quality – gains valuable new experience: in making bigger worlds, in making RPGs, in focusing more on story. It means Square Enix learns how to make best-in-class realtime combat, and how a modestly sized studio can be so prolific. It also means Tokyo producer Saito gets a particularly irksome thorn out of his side by sending Yoko to Osaka for a couple of years. Even that, it seems, has paid off. "I've been working with Yoko for a while now," he says, "and I don't think I've ever seen him so happy, so excited about a project. I think it might turn out to be something very special." For a moment, Yoko's mask slips, and he allows himself a smile. ■

As in so many Platinum games, the real magic happens in the air. Expect the usual array of crazy aerial moves








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AN AUDIENCE WITH…

YU MIYAKE

Dragon Quest's executive producer on the challenges of exporting a monster RPG success

By Simon Parkin

Photography **Hohhe**





CV

Miyake's intention may have been to use a job in the videogame industry as nothing more than a springboard into book publishing, but his choice to join Enix was fortuitous. The company's relatively small size, coupled with its megawatt success in *Dragon Quest*, allowed Miyake to climb the ranks quickly, giving him the opportunity to support new and creatively invigorating projects such as *Bust A Groove*, and Treasure's lost gem *Rakugaki Showtime*. Since the merger between Square and Enix, Miyake has principally worked as executive producer on the *Dragon Quest* series, but his involvement has stretched into titles as diverse as *Space Invaders Infinity Gene*, *Sleeping Dogs* and even the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot.

To Japanese videogame followers, *Dragon Quest* and its creator Yuji Horii are national treasures. The launch of a new entry to the whimsical RPG series, now in its 30th year, is a cultural occasion of Harry Potter-esque proportions. On February 10, 1988, for example, 392 Japanese schoolchildren were arrested for truancy in what a National Police Agency spokesperson described at the time as "a national disgrace". *Dragon Quest III* sold a million copies that day, a level of success only rivalled by *Super Mario* at the time. The game's release proved so disruptive that its publisher, Enix, promised the Japanese government to only release subsequent *Dragon Quest* games at the weekend or during national holidays.

That kind of success has never quite translated overseas, where the *Dragon Quest* games have only a modest, if dedicated, following. **Yu Miyake**, an executive producer who has worked at Enix since the early 1990s, is responsible for changing these fortunes outside of Japan, while ensuring its ongoing survival at home, where in recent years many seemingly evergreen series have faltered. The recent, well-received release of *Dragon Quest Builders*, a more structured take on *Minecraft*, is just part of a broader plan to prepare the world for the 11th instalment in the series. Can it work?

How did you come to work at Enix?

To be honest, I wasn't a huge fan of videogames at the time. My dream was to become a book editor. To join one of the big publishing houses in Japan, places like Shueisha and Kodansha and so on, you have to graduate from one of the good universities here. Even with a top degree, places are severely limited at the most prestigious publishing houses. At that time Enix had just started publishing books – mostly strategy guides for *Dragon Quest* and so on. So I started working at Enix as a part-time job on the publishing side of the operation in the hope that it might offer me a route into book publishing.

I had a lot of pressure from a friend who was a huge *Dragon Quest* fan at the time. We were looking through the local classified job ads. When my friend saw the *Dragon Quest* logo on the page, he told me that I had to apply, if only to get him some merchandise from the game. I'm still friends with him and he's forever telling me that, as I owe him the job, I'm obliged to get his name into the credits of the next *Dragon Quest* title.

Had you played *Dragon Quest* at that time?

It's the 30th anniversary of the game now and I'm 49 this year. I was just a little bit old to play the game when it first came out, I think. So, no, I hadn't. When I was a kid, *Space Invaders*, *Galaxian* and so on were the big titles. We played games in the arcades, and not so much at home.

What was it that kept you in the videogame industry and stopped you from moving over to books?

Just as I entered the industry, the Super Famicom launched. Videogames were suddenly becoming very interesting. The potential of what this medium could be was opening up. It was that possibility that held my interest, I think.

Did you ever consider writing for games, given the ambitions you once had?

My problem is that I give up pretty easily. Yes, I did give it a shot, but it didn't work out [laughs].

Which Super Famicom games in particular around that time gave you an inkling of how the medium was developing in exciting ways?

When I first joined Enix my job was in publishing, but we all pitched in with the testing and debugging of new games. One that caught my attention at that time was *ActRaiser*. It was such a visually striking game. The camera would zoom in and out in this dramatic, cinematic way. The game was too hard for me, admittedly, but I perceived in it the way in which the medium was evolving at a fast and encouraging rate.

I stayed working in the publishing department for a number of years. Then, at about the time when the Sega Saturn and the Sony PlayStation launched, I moved across onto the development side and began producing original titles for the company. My first job on a *Dragon Quest* title was in 2000. The team was deep into development of *Dragon Quest VII* when I arrived. Almost immediately after that came out we started work on *Dragon Quest VIII* on PlayStation 2. That was when SquareSoft and Enix, companies that had been rivals for many years, merged to become a single entity. It was funny, because then we had to argue which of the two companies' flagship titles we were going to launch first: *Dragon Quest VIII* or *Final Fantasy XII*.

It's way in the past now, but people would probably be interested to hear about the atmosphere at Enix at the time of the merger with Square. These companies had been head-to-head rivals for years, and suddenly they were becoming one. Can you remember how the news was taken by the staff?

You won't believe it, but we actually didn't find out about the merger until the day before it happened. As you can imagine, it was a huge surprise. At the time, Square had about a thousand employees. Enix only had a hundred. Being such a small studio meant that the staff were principally made up of producers. Everything else was outsourced. That was our setup. So at the time of our merger it was almost like we gained this huge raft of resources. It wasn't too jarring in that sense.

“IN THE OLD DAYS, ALL A PRODUCER HAD TO DO WAS TO COME UP WITH AN UNUSUAL IDEA, AND THAT WAS THAT”



Miyake’s ***Bust A Groove*** **– and its sequel, which was never released outside of Japan – remains one of the best rhythm-action games of the PlayStation era, with a characterful cast, a catchy soundtrack and a dance-off battle mechanic that’s, regretfully, never been repeated**

One thing that intrigued me was that, at the time, Square was putting out a *Final Fantasy* game every single year. There were never any delays. It was like clockwork over there. By comparison, at Enix we had endless delays with our games. So the merger gave us the opportunity to see how they were managing to pull this off. I was sad to discover that there was no secret. They simply worked harder [laughs].

Was there anything you learned in those early years following the merger that has stayed with you, that you still take into account to this day?
[Pause] Well, I got a raise out of it. That was pretty memorable [laughs].

In those days, Enix was putting out a variety of games. *Dragon Quest* was always a major part of the company’s activities, but it seems to have become a greater and greater focus over the years, while other, more unusual games – such as *Bust A Groove*, for example – have fallen away. How do you feel about that narrowing of focus?
At the time, PlayStation had just launched. That system made it very easy to make games. It was just an easy platform to create games for. Enix was a strange company because in many cases, within a year of a new staff member joining the company, they would be promoted to being a producer. At that point, you’d have a lot of freedom to be able to make the kinds of projects that interested you. It was just a much more straightforward process to get a new game out of the door – you could make a game with about 20 to 30 people within a year. That would have cost only between 50 and a hundred million yen to produce. With the size of the company we had at the time, we’d be releasing about two or three games in parallel every year.

As a result, the market was a bit flooded, to be honest. And because of the limitations in the graphical processing, many of the games looked very similar. They were aimed at a similar market of players. They cost about the same as each other in the shops. So the only way to really stand out at that time was to have a unique concept. Nowadays we have different types of audiences, different platforms, different regions and different price-points. The number of key decisions we have to make as creators has increased drastically. In the old days, all a producer had to do was to come up with an unusual idea, and that was that. But now we have to focus on all of these other areas of the development process, and it’s drawn the focus away from coming up with a novel idea, perhaps. I think that’s had a bearing on the lack of diversity in terms of the kinds of games that are being released today.

Relatedly, over the years *Dragon Quest* games have had a knack of appearing on the most popular hardware of the day. Presumably development on the games often begins before you know which console is gong to be dominant. Have you just been lucky in making those decisions?
The formula is quite simple. It’s about having that *Dragon Quest* feel: having [Akira] Toriyama-san’s designs and [Yuji] Horii-san’s storytelling in the game. While the videogame market has expanded greatly, it’s also become more divided in terms of hardware and markets in recent years. Always the question for us is: how do we bring the *Dragon Quest* formula to as many potential customers as possible at any given moment in time? It’s very consumer-focused in that sense, so when we’re starting a mainline *Dragon Quest* title we always look at the market and try to judge which is the most popular hardware of the time. That said, for the less conventional *Dragon Quest* spinoffs, we take a slightly different approach – we pick a platform that best suits the mechanical traits of the game.

With the *Final Fantasy* series, as the design changes so dramatically from game to game, the risk is always that the changes will alienate the fans. With *Dragon Quest*, it seems that the risk is the other way around. The games follow a much more prescribed path, so the challenge is to keep it fresh in order that ▶



players don't become over-familiar with, as you put it, the formula. Is that fair?
Instead of changing the game itself, we focus on changing the way it's played in the world. For example, with *Dragon Quest IX* we made a handheld game, because that's how people were playing games predominantly at that time. *Dragon Quest X* we made into an online game. So that's how we try to keep the series fresh. In fact, we run the risk of alienating the fans when we moved from pixel-art to 3D with the move to *Dragon Quest VIII*. And when we made the tenth game, a lot of players complained, saying that *Dragon Quest* should never be an online game. But it turns out that, in each of these cases, when you start playing the game, you find that it still has the same feel. It's still quintessentially *Dragon Quest*.

If feels like there's another key difference between the two series. With *Final Fantasy XV* the team is mindful of the need for the game to appeal to western audiences; by contrast, *Dragon Quest X* didn't even come out in the west. Has the team given up on trying to make *Dragon Quest* appealing overseas?
We're still trying! [Laughs] It's a topic we have been thinking about a lot internally: the question of why *Final Fantasy* is so much more popular than *Dragon Quest* in the west. One conclusion that we've reached is that it's a question of historical timing. When the Famicom came out, *Dragon Quest* was the key game everyone was playing. But when the PlayStation came out, *Final Fantasy VII* was the game that everyone was playing. So the source of nostalgia is different for both groups: in Japan it's *Dragon Quest* while overseas it's *Final Fantasy*. The truth is that if we'd put a lot of effort into localising *Dragon Quest* at the time, we probably wouldn't be facing this issue today. I probably shouldn't be saying this, but we kind of messed up in that regard.

We put a lot of effort into *Dragon Quest VIII*. We put a lot of thought on how we could appeal outside of Japan. We used a lot more regional voice acting, for example. We put a lot of thought into the menu design. But we didn't want to give up the core element that made the game *Dragon Quest*. The game did have some modest sales overseas, but it wasn't anywhere close to the level of *Final Fantasy* sales.

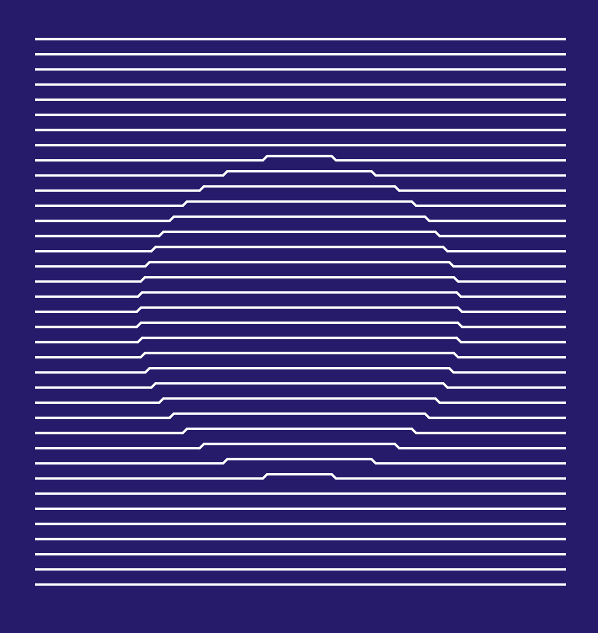
One thing that does stand out: in Japan the target audience for *Dragon Quest* is vast. It ranges from primary-school students to people in their 50s. Now, Akira Toriyama's art style is cartoonish, and in Japan that doesn't alienate anyone; it's not seen as childish. But outside of Japan, I think there's often a stigma attached to that kind of aesthetic. Now, when an adult tries the game, they will discover that the subject matter is actually quite mature. Nevertheless, players are still left with this disconnect between how the game looks and how it plays. That's a tension that just doesn't exist in Japan. What we're seeing now is that the age of people who are playing is rising. Interest is also increasing. We're trying to put a lot more effort into promoting overseas the spinoff titles we've been working on – *Dragon Quest Builders* and *Dragon Quest Heroes* – in order to soften up the ground for *Dragon Quest XI*.

"AKIRA TORIYAMA'S ART STYLE IS CARTOONISH, AND IN JAPAN THAT DOESN'T ALIENATE ANYONE; IT'S NOT SEEN AS CHILDISH"

We've seen a lot of long-running Japanese game series run into difficulties in recent times. Is your current focus on creating diverse games underneath the umbrella of *Dragon Quest* – such as *Builders*, which has been well received everywhere – a plan to help reduce the pressure on the flagship releases?
It's important to understand that the root of *Dragon Quest*'s success is unrelated to the fact that it's an RPG. There are other factors that are responsible for its survival. The thing that's key to its success is Horii-san's talent for storytelling and Toriyama's recognisable artwork. Combine that with the game's idiosyncratic sense of adventure, and you have a recipe for success that is not genre-dependent.

Is there ever tension between Yuji Horii and the team in terms of the kind of stories he wants to tell, and the team or the company's plans for the game?
Trying to appease Horii-san is part of everyday life working on the *Dragon Quest* team. He has a huge amount of respect because he has a fantastic eye for detail in terms of ensuring the game is approachable for newcomers while simultaneously appealing to long-term fans. He might point out that a particular menu feature will make no sense to a newcomer, and we'll go away and redesign it, or make it more legible. Likewise, he'll know which parts of the game are boring or patronising to people who have been *Dragon Quest* fans for three decades. We place a lot of stock in his input on the game. But of course there are differences of opinion. That just comes with the territory of working in videogames. ■





BRUTAL LEGEND

The story of Speedball 2, the future-sport classic forged in the fires of Britsoft's 16bit glory days

By Duncan Harris

When you wake up being masturbated by a great big horny gorilla, you'd best look like you're enjoying it. So advises Thundercrack!, a pornographic black comedy horror B-movie, one of many weird fables to pass through London's notorious Scala Cinema during the late 1980s. Another tells of hooligan futuresports, luxurious dungeons, and happenstance worthy of a godlike piston-powered computer. Let's start at the beginning.

Daniel Malone spent his time at Ipswich Art College arguing with all but one of his teachers: the typography tutor who let him draw comicbook characters in class. Not that he didn't like the subject, she understood, but he already had two masters in superhero artists Jack Kirby and John Buscema.

"Batman was the first guy I drew," Malone explains, "but Marvel is my biggest influence. But so little of it existed then that you often had to draw something if you wanted to see it — and I wanted it, so I drew and drew and drew."

Exposed to American editions of The Fantastic Four by his dad, prolific commercial artist Jerry Malone, Dan's childhood favourite was astronaut-turned-granite-skinned-clobberer the Thing. After Marvel UK launched The Mighty World Of Marvel in 1972, its first British weekly, Malone never missed an issue. He was bemused, though: its characters, once iconic, now lacked charm and definition. Not for another 50 issues did he realise his mistake: MWOM was a reprint, its stories dating back to the 1960s. That's when it clicked.

"Kirby, the king, had evolved his style to have this graphic rock-like look for the Thing, and it was a pure, natural evolution of him just drawing the character over and over again. That was magical. I never forgot it."

Neither Marvel nor Britain's own 2000AD were hiring when Malone left college a decade later. A brief stint at underground publisher Knockabout Comics offered work but little pay, and even worse if it was 'a bad month'.

It was his loyal typography tutor who spotted an ad in media digest Campaign. It seemed that someone did need a '2000AD-style artist'.

Armed with a thick portfolio of extracurricular college work, the graduate Malone was "thrilled just to be in London, in King's Cross, right in the heart of it. Well, more in the armpit, with fucking crowds of smack dealers outside by the snooker hall. But The Scala was great, brilliant. You had to run the gauntlet just to get in the place."

Up its incongruous fairytale tower he went, to rooms adjacent to its 'cinema of sin'. Malone's roughhouse style satisfied marketing director Pete Stone, and the job of professional artist was his.

The studio proper was on the next floor down, where he was introduced to his new desk, his new colleagues, and — wait, what was with all the keyboards and monitors?

"Oh, so you're doing computer games, then!" Malone realised.

This was Palace Software in 1985, which, Malone remembers, was just after Live Aid. "I had no interest in computer games," he says. "I'd come all the way up to London for a job interview I thought was for comics." But whatever, he gave it a try, stumbling not only into the game industry's first wave of dedicated artists, but also into one of its true pioneers.

He continues: "If you look at games companies at the time, Palace was very artist-led. They wanted to make the artists' ideas work. That was 'what the programmers were there for'."

"They showed me a running version of *Cauldron* on the ZX Spectrum, and I thought it was just some rough demo. 'Is this the finished game?' It looked basic, almost crude. I realised I'd have to scale down everything I was doing. When I did the character Tal for [*The Sacred Armour Of*] *Antiriad*, he was two 8×8 sprites on the Commodore 64. The sprite editor we used meant we had to draw him in two halves and stick him together. I had to draw him out on paper first, actually draw these big pixels on a bit of graph paper just to design the character."

Thus begins the journey of what Two Point Studios founder **Gary Carr** considers "the best pixel artist in the world".

In total, Palace Software would incubate four future Bitmap Brothers: Malone, Carr, audio wizard Richard Joseph, and designer-coder Sean Griffiths. Carr recalls: "It was a cool company. We felt we were doing something edgy. We were part of a film company and had interesting people everywhere."

That would be an understatement.

When they weren't making games such as *Cauldron* and the infamous *Barbarian*, Palace's people would climb the stairs behind the Scala's auditorium and watch its whacked-out panoply of movies and moviegoers: the Laurel and Hardy appreciation society Sons Of The Desert; the owners of the occasional latex glove found in the aisles after lesbian all-nighters; and, Malone remembers, "this cat that used to walk around on its hind legs".

Malone was an avid skateboarder, and would often ride across The Scala's invitingly tiled floor. The Scala, in return, would infiltrate the studio and its games, as the artist recalls:

"Stanley Schembri used to get really angry at his computer and literally burn it with a lighter and aerosol. The keyboard caught fire once and he chucked it out of the window, into Pentonville Road." Sean Griffiths also remembers lead programmer Richard Leinfellner letting his C64 go — this time from the roof.

Seared into the memory of one-time journalist **Gary Penn**, meanwhile, is Schembri and Malone's visit to Commodore User magazine: "Stan was off his fucking… He and Dan came up in his Mini. We'd all been drinking, and probably worse, when Stan decided to drive us around London with the door open and waving this stick, pretending he was blind. I probably literally shat myself."

Palace was moving into 16bit development when Malone, somehow still alive, first encountered The Bitmap Brothers. It was a trade show demo of *Xenon*. "Arcade-style! Sharp! Not the bloody great Lego bricks of the C64!" he gushes. "I was hungry for some of that 16bit stuff." Months later, the Bitmaps' *Speedball* became the lunchtime diet at Palace. Its taste, Carr thought, seemed familiar:

"We were an artistic company but the Bitmaps went a level further. They were pushing the art style during what was initially an 8bit timeframe. We had great games at Palace, but one didn't necessarily look or feel like another, or feel like it was from the same brand. The Bitmap games came from a stable: they had things you recognised instantly, certain ways of applying light and colour.

This was the early days of making computer games and it was pretty organic, but they were designing from the ground up. Dan had that same integrity.

"I was an artist alongside him, and we were peer-level artists, but I couldn't sit in the same room in terms of ability. He could hide pixels when pixels were like bricks. He could turn a 16-colour palette into a 256-colour palette. He could do effects with colour that used the chroma of the screen, made things happen with pixels that I couldn't even dream of. The way he made things look solid was almost impossible. He already was a Bitmap Brother, he just happened to be at a different company."

Not that Palace didn't have its own reputation as an artistic powerhouse. Comic-book legends such as Alan Grant and Pat Mills were knocking at its door, in fact, keen to collaborate. It was *Barbarian* creator Steve Brown, Malone says, who was "instrumental in getting comic artists like me involved in games". His face darkens. "None of that other stuff happened, though, because Palace Pictures bled Palace Software dry."

The ill fortune of the studio's parent film company (another war story for when you finish reading this one) meant that despite the considerable success of the *Barbarian* games, little could stop a bloodbath of active projects. After *The Sacred Armour Of Antiriad* in 1986, both of Malone's next big games were shelved. "*Super Thief*," Games Machine magazine reported, "casts the player as a model of unsullied selfishness, robbing the future for all its worth." *Astounding Astral Adventures*, meanwhile, attempted to fill a whole galaxy with such rogues.

No fewer than 19 games were in development at Palace, internally and externally, when **Patricia Mitchell** joined as a producer. "It was very appealing," she recalls. "More like movie production than games and ahead of its time in lots of ways. The quality of the artists' work was unparalleled, Richard Joseph's audio was groundbreaking, and external talent like Zippo Games and Sensible Software all should have made for a successful formula.

'The difficulty was finding programmers who could craft these elements into playable 16bit games. The fabulous graphics ate up memory, the processors had a learning curve, and each machine needed individual programming to get the best out of the hardware."

Palace killed its 8bit projects first, in a bid to cut costs, but the 16bit installed base was too small to fill the void. Furthermore, the games came out late and underperformed. "It was the epoch of large publishing houses who often owned the distributors and shaped the market," Mitchell says. "It was tough for small independents."

Malone remembers the aftermath: "No one knew what was going on, whether you'd have a job one day after the next." The writing was on the wall, and Mitchell and Stone used their contacts to see where people could go. Meanwhile, over by the Thames, the opposite was happening for The Bitmap Brothers: the studio was diversifying. Artist **Mark Coleman** was thinking beyond what was next on the slate. He declares: "I really did not want to do a *Speedball 2*. Having done *Xenon 2* in the interim, I was in no mood to revisit my past mistakes. Plus, they were talking about *Gods*, and that got me really excited. I could visualise exactly how I wanted that game to look, and what we could do with it."

Sat before the Palace copy of *Speedball*, Malone was considering his next game, too. He remembers thinking out loud: "I really need to see these guys."

Weeks later, he was one of them.

"God, it was a hike to get out to Wapping," Malone complains. "And when you did it was so quiet – too quiet. There was The Prospect Of Whitby pub, which was all right because people actually travelled to that one, but that was it. There was a Spanish lass who worked on the top floor of the Bitmaps' office and had a record label, and she was the only other bit of creativity in that whole block."

For his first fortnight at Bitmap HQ, Malone was the only person working on the new *Speedball*. "They put me on it just to start doing the characters and figure out the angle. They were like: 'Have you played *Speedball 1*? Right, we want a bigger pitch, double the size.'"

Speaking to Amiga Power magazine in 1991, The Bitmap Brothers' **Eric Matthews** explained: "We knew we had to make it quite different to be worth doing. The increased screen size was to make it more exciting when you got into the other player's area – as it is in *Kick Off*. In the first game you can just throw the ball all the way down the pitch, which makes it far too easy." It was, he added, "like playing in a shoebox, it's so claustrophobic".

For Malone, those first weeks would produce a considerable body of artwork, albeit "for my own pleasure. The brief wasn't to draw lots of pretty pictures, it was to 'Give us some fucking graphics'. Things really only started moving when Rob came in."

Robert Trevellyan, like all programmers, is a problem-solver. And like a lot of computer game programmers during the '80s, his first big problem was employment. "There was no such thing as a school where you went and 'did game development'," he recalls. "Without some kind of contact in the business, or some good luck, it was hard to get in unless you could produce a complete package. I could never pretend or claim to be a game designer, and I didn't have that friend who could do graphics, like the guys who did *Civilization* and *Railroad Tycoon*. There was no obvious path for me."

The cousin of a student friend, however, worked at Electric Dreams, the celebrated label behind *Spindizzy*, *Firetrack* and a host of movie tie-ins and coin-op conversions. "I went and I talked to them, and I said: 'I have no experience. Tell me what I have to do, what it takes'. They told me to do an eight-way scrolling demo, and that it should take a couple of weeks."

Loaned one of the studio's Commodore 64s, Trevellyan bought a 6502 assembler – "'You must be confident to spend £50 on software,' said the guy in the store" – and delivered the demo ten days later. They gave him a contract there and then. "It's not like they had a long list of resumes from people with obvious qualifications," he quips. "What could they do?"

The project he worked on was cancelled after six months. He was put in touch with The Bitmap Brothers by his supervisor, and the process started again: "'Let's do a demo and see what you can do'." So he produced another eight-way scrolling demo, this time for the ST, "with completely uninteresting graphics, but it showed I could make the hardware do something". That something just happened to be precisely what *Speedball 2* required.

Working from his home on the south coast – he would later move in-house – Trevellyan was given a crash course in 16bit game dev by Bitmaps Steve Kelly and Mike Montgomery. "Just things like when you first start up the ST or Amiga, the first thing you do if you're making a game is kick out the operating system and strip the machine down to the bare essentials, and load your code. They had those bread-and-butter things down already. The core coding for the game and all the AI, though, was based on Eric's vision."

You see, before *Speedball 2* had the perfect pitch, it had the perfect pitch. Product manager **Graeme Boxall**, then at Mirrorsoft, describes its journey around various offices and desks. "The original document was this four- or five-page pamphlet – drawings, a bit of art, and Eric's writing. It wasn't a design, just a flavour. It's got some things that never made the game, like players on hoverboards, but it's perfect. You got it straight away. Everybody who saw it wanted to photocopy it, to show other teams how it's done." Trevellyan adds: "I don't think anyone was going in wondering if *Speedball 2* would be any fun."

Now they just had to make it.

"We knew the horizontal scrolling was going to be a challenge because that's why it wasn't done in the first game," Trevellyan says. "Vertical scrolling wasn't quite free on the ST but was certainly cheaper than horizontal. We had to adopt some very tricky techniques, and you can really see what's going on if you put the ST and Amiga versions side by side.

"You'll see that the ST version has the same sides and bonus features – the chutes and stuff – but the central area is just a series of 16×16 tiles, whereas on the Amiga there was a nice design to it. We couldn't do horizontal scrolling with a fully designed graphic at 25 frames per second on the ST, so what we had was values preloaded into a whole bunch of registers. The 68000 had 16: eight address registers and eight data registers – so, about ten or 12 were preloaded with values to create that tiled central area. Then, at each offset position of the scroll, you'd load in a rotated set of values and just blast those across the majority of the pitch, picking up the individual graphics for the sides and the ends."

Malone was plotting all of his pixels by joystick at this point, and there was none better than the TAC-2 (Totally Accurate Controller MK2) by Suncom. "It was the best joystick I ever used. It was really clean, and it kicked when you used it." One thing he was keen to change, though, if he could swing it, was the money-minded porting of ST graphics to his more capable dream machine, the Amiga.

"Historically, it was a case of copying the ST graphics straight across without touching them – but I touched them," he smiles. "Peter Molyneux asked once, 'What's your angle?' I said I just wanted to hide the pixels. I wanted them to be smooth like it's a comic or a coin-op. I wanted to use every single bit of that palette, so I did the sprites first on Amiga and then they went over to the ST. I held up everyone doing a new floor for the pitch, which is why the Amiga version has that star design. I got told off for it but it was right: the Amiga was the superior machine. Porting from ST wasn't good enough."

This stubbornness, he continues, is why the Amiga version of *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* also has more animation for its ball launchers, and better lighting in its management screens. He couldn't redraw the game from scratch, but the Amiga palette meant he could greatly improve the stippling used to achieve shades of colour.

"People – journalists – often made jokes about palettes back then. I wasn't going to be 'monochrome guy'. The kids wanted bright and sharp, and I like distinguishing characters, and objects with purpose, by their colours as much as their shape. *Speedball 2* was all kinds of blues and cyans, and some purples; that's as close as I could get to a shade, where I'd have to use purple or magenta knocked down a bit." His signature art style, he explains, a kind of flat-line technique with one flat colour and a few shadow layers, was born on the Amiga. Now he uses it everywhere.

"PETER MOLYNEUX ASKED ONCE, 'WHAT'S YOUR ANGLE?' I SAID I JUST WANTED TO HIDE THE PIXELS. I WANTED THEM TO BE SMOOTH LIKE IT'S A COMIC OR A COIN-OP"

The other mandate for the game's lone stadium was to show more of each character than the strictly top-down original. "I really struggled with it," Malone says, "but I learned the lesson. It's a bit like isometric but the angle's like a 45-degree. It's like taking a box and just opening it out so you can see everything."

On their journey from ink to pixels, *Speedball 2*'s characters had already been upgraded to Malone 2.0, less theatrical and more utilitarian. "I loved sport for the same reason I loved games: the idea of performing with people watching, where everyone knows if you fold under the pressure. But I hated football, I just watched skateboarding. That's where the hard shell pad design and the knee sliding in *Speedball 2* came from."

Matthews, meanwhile, had given it a backstory: the sport's slide into corruption and exile; its underground reincarnation; the emergence of a fresh-faced rookie team. "Eric had his gameflow up in his head, and from there it was all logical progression," Malone says. "I did a few storyboards to show the different title screens and how they worked, and that was the first time I'd really bartered with a programmer: 'Can I have this? Surely this?' I didn't want their feet to slip, for instance, but we never could get that one. It was always my dream on the Amiga to have them walk, but I think it was always quite hard to sync up the four-frame run."

Handed this 'proper futuristic basis' for the game's second coming, Malone set about not just drawing it, but naming most

of it, too: "The original expression 'Brutal Deluxe' is a music reference. It's a tune by Nitro Deluxe called This Brutal House, this wicked house tune from the early '90s. I came up with a lot of the team names, actually, about 20. 'Revolver' was my old scooter club, the most violent scooter club in Suffolk." But weren't they the worst team in the game? "Yeah, I don't know what happened there. Someone must have fucked up the levels."

Teams are the backbone of *Speedball 2*: the way they look and act position the game bang on the halfway line between arcade title and sim. This is a treacherous place, maybe even cursed, strewn with the bodies of competitive online games and EA Sports career modes. This game triumphs, though, for two reasons: elegance of progression (save-and-spend has never felt so immediate) and visibility of AI (save-and-spend has never felt so important).

Trevellyan explains how all of the key attributes of *Speedball 2*'s AI are nakedly exposed through its management screens. Values for Strength and Aggression, for instance, are run through a formula whenever a player starts tackling (be it a sliding tackle or brawl), with a random number thrown in for good measure. "If you're incredibly strong and he's incredibly weak, you're going to get the ball most of the time."

The most critical attribute, though – the thing that makes Super Nashwan the scariest team on the fixture list – is response time, a blend of Intelligence and Speed. Regardless of whether it's singleplayer or multiplayer, CPU teammates are always thinking about position: where they are, where their teammates are, where the ball is, and who's got it. "The bulk of the AI code is getting players into the right position at the right time," Trevellyan explains. "It makes a big difference to how smart the opposition seems if you simply recalculate those things more or less often. Intelligence also determines the size of the calculation area. They really do differ. It's not all smoke and mirrors, by any means."

There is some theatricality, though, as Matthews explained at the time: "We exaggerated it so that if you've built up a player to be fast, he really will be. With most management games – which aren't the sort of games I'd ever normally play – you might as well have changed nothing, for all the difference it seems to make during play."

Speedball 2 knows that AI doesn't sell itself. With the right presentation and theatrics, however, it's what can turn a game into a sport, and the sportsmen into superstars. Nowhere is this clearer than in the game's management screen, which Malone would rather have had called the 'gymnasium': a place that's more about looks than skills.

He explains: "The last thing I did at Palace, along with *Super Thief*, was that game *Astounding Astral Adventures*. A lot of the characters for that are *Speedball* characters, that's what they evolved from. There's a Laurel and Hardy-type couple in there as well [a debt, presumably, to the aforementioned Sons Of The Desert], these fools who are just mechanics. The names – things like Roscopp or Jams – would always come from the faces, or vice versa."

Put it all together and, in a blur of matches and management sessions, *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* gives the player a 360-degree view of their team that never has time to fade. By acting like their stats and their place in the 3-3-3 formation, the players identify themselves as Garrick, Midia, or whichever other menace you've poached from the transfer market, even when they're just a swarm of identical heads and shoulders.

"If someone said, 'Give me 50 more *Speedball 2* characters – I've got a budget,' I'd drop everything, just to show the stuff that never made it," Malone says. "I wanted several female characters – we had a big conversation about drugs, what it would take for a woman to compete in that world – and I got two in, but people thought they were blokes!"

***Speedball 2* is** a very handsome kind of ugly, then, and quite loud about its subtleties. It's as far from your average game of ball-meets-face as any Bitmap title is from its arcade idols. Case in point: its intro.

The first few seconds of most games today are exactly the same: screen after screen of idents and corporate logos; a billboard for the sponsors. This has set a toxic trend, and the power and potential of that moment is wasted. It is easy to forget that once upon a time it was the developer's canvas, to harness the player's excitement, and to build anticipation. This was never lost on The Bitmap Brothers.

The show begins in those one or two seconds after the disk stops grinding, when that initial load is done. Everything in RAM is now storyboarded, calculated by man rather than machine. First, we see white letters on black, blinking in like a ticker or a telex: 'IMAGE WORKS PRESENTS... A BITMAP BROTHERS GAME.' Pause, fade to black. Then comes the bull-rush.

Malone's title screen for *Brutal Deluxe* might be one of the best of any videogame: a stadium in a city of endless steel. It's hard to imagine a better debut for the Bitmap raised on comic books than this single low-res panel, suggesting as it does a world of tyranny and intrigue, and a sport in which everything has changed.

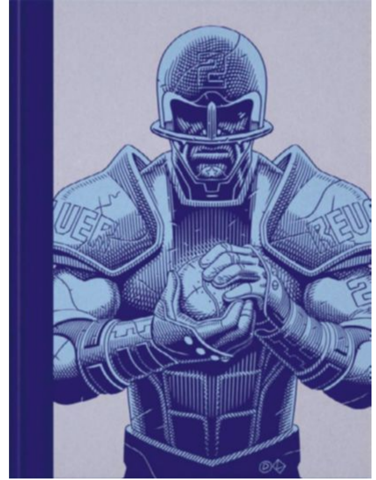
From the speakers: a theme tune which may or may not be techno, might not even be music, but is quite perfectly *Speedball*. The notes, all angular honks and squalls, pile upon each other in a bid to be heard first. They swerve and skid and outmuscle each other across three sweet minutes of precision pandemonium.

Rhythm King's **Martin Heath** is very clear about this: "**John Foxx** is a fucking genius. He's an artist from Yorkshire, and he hates Midge Ure."

Quiet amid the vanguard of electronic music, with work spanning numerous artforms and personae, Foxx is perhaps still best known as the original frontman of Ultravox. Many of his gaming fans don't even know him by name, but as Nation 12, a short-lived Rhythm King supergroup founded by **Tim Simenon**, who explains:

"Kerry Hopwood, who was working with me at the time, doing programming, was a big John Foxx fan. We went to John's house up in Highgate, and I actually approached him with the idea of him singing on a Bomb The Bass song. But he said, 'You know, I don't really do music any more'. He was doing all this photography stuff. 'But I do have a few demos I can play you.' And they were brilliant. I thought that maybe we could just do something with those tracks, turn that into a separate project."

The group produced its first track, Remember, before Simenon invited Shem McCauley (then performing as DJ Streets Ahead) to





This article is an extract from The Bitmap Brothers: Universe (left), which is out now. The book, published by Read-Only Memory, features CRT-mimicking screenshots (above) plus bundles of never-before-seen concept art

work on a second, Listen To The Drummer. The trio didn't last long – Simenon left to produce sophomore Bomb The Bass album Unknown Territory – but McCauley kept Nation 12 going, bringing in ex-The Fall member Simon Rogers to help Foxx produce an EP. That's when Heath came knocking. As he recalls: "John was fascinated at the idea of young gamers producing their own software from scratch without anyone telling them what to do."

In fact, as Foxx himself puts it, this democratisation was happening everywhere. "You were beginning to see a point where musicians could have their own studios for the first time. Artists and designers could have their own machinery; so could animators, writers, gamers... The potential seemed endless.

"I remember at the time becoming conscious of a new generation taking computers and games and even coding as their primary cultural currency – the first full generation to do that. This was a seismic shift away from the way music had dominated previous generations. Now it was all technology-based – so this generation predicted the future perfectly."

"I'd read Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s and realised that what he predicted was finally happening. It was a technological revolution and we were all at the start of it. You found yourself there purely by coincidence, by accident. That's how I really like set the stage and the atmosphere, just as a movie theme sets up the world of the film. They were the gateway."

As with Simenon and *Xenon 2*'s 'Megablast', though, Nation 12 would need a translator for the new world of code – someone who, as it happened, had only recently learned the language himself.

Richard Joseph was a trained musician and grade-eight vocalist when he joined the prog band CMU for their second album. "He was fantastic, genuinely brilliant," says longtime collaborator **Michael Burdett**. (Bitmap fans will recognise him, too, but more on that in a moment.) Joseph then went solo and signed a recording contract with EMI which, as Burdett remembers, gave him "a substantial amount of money. He made really wonderful stuff, a kind of cross between Al Jarreau and Steely Dan, if you like. But it was a funny time in the music industry: punk was coming through, and both his record label and publishing house started showing a lack of interest."

Stymied by a contract which meant he couldn't record solo material elsewhere, Joseph used the EMI money to buy a recording studio in Chorleywood, which he rented out for £35 per day. He formed a band, Baghdad Five, and put out a single called Loving Infection. Burdett laughs: "The mid-'80s was definitely the wrong time for that one."

"I REMEMBER AT THE TIME BECOMING CONSCIOUS OF A NEW GENERATION TAKING COMPUTERS AND GAMES AND EVEN CODING AS THEIR PRIMARY CULTURAL CURRENCY"

things to happen. It was just like landing in London and punk beginning to happen some years before. A new world was opening up – a bit like being in the Wild West. Lawless, chaotic, and fun. Who could have guessed it would all get colonised by corporations?"

"It was a technological revolution and we were all at the start of it. You found yourself there purely by coincidence, by accident. That's how I really like things to happen. It was just like landing in London and punk beginning to happen some years before."

Foxx was brought into the Wapping studio, given the spiel, and shown some graphics sequences. As he describes it:

"The Bitmap Brothers philosophy was never articulated, it went without saying. You either got it not.

"They were enthusiasts. They understood their own generation because they shared all those fundamental enthusiasms and could see clearly what the potential was, and how it needed to be realised in order to get maximum blast from what they were making. It was embodied in everything they did."

The music was sequenced at Foxx's home. The Bitmaps had given him a 'sound box' programmed with all of the sounds they had available at the time.

His mission, as far as he saw it, was "to make something that could stand as a sort of annexe to the game, something of equal effect and quality – as far as you could. The songs were always intended to evoke a world that the games might take place in. They

Now at something of a loose end, Joseph saw an advert in Melody Maker for someone to soundtrack computer games. It was Palace Software, where Joseph would lend his talents to games such as *Stifflip & Co* and *Barbarian*.

"Rich's girlfriend at the time, Alex, provided a lot of female voices for games," Burdett says. "Once, he filled a wardrobe with pillows and a microphone, and he put her in it. She was coming out with all sorts of noises of alarm and whatever, but Rich wasn't convinced they were realistic enough. So, every now and then, he'd throw open the cupboard door and swing a punch – missing, obviously – just to get the correct level of fear."

"Palace did everything in hex, and Rich didn't know that. He was working 22 hours a day learning to code and program, and I don't quite know how he did it. He was a fantastic editor. You couldn't have music and sound effects at the same time with some of the early hardware, and he was very good at using the polyphony of things. I always thought of him as a bit like a Frank Zappa or Prince."

Foxx agrees: "He was excellent. The only thing I occasionally regretted was he tended to straighten out some of the more jagged and eccentric timing I deliberately used in places. But I respected his judgement – it was teamwork, after all."

Foxx and Joseph's work on *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* is indeed complementary. That 'polyphony' of the game's sound effects is hardly melodic, but it is definitely musical. It takes a goal or an

injury, either of which makes the crowd noise decay, before you appreciate the ear-bashing you get the rest of the time. The effects, all metal on metal and pulverised human yelps, are so savagely cut as to sound surreal; but the result is an unbroken, hardware-defying din. Then, from the terraces, a certain someone shouts "Ice cream!"

"It was my idea," confesses Burdett, who happens to have voiced almost all of The Bitmap Brothers' games. "Rich had got a room at Pinewood Studios, which without a doubt would have been through family contacts. I went off to write music for TV, and Rich stuck with games, but we remained great friends. We'd still get together, and when we did it would always be: 'I'll tell you what I need!'"

"There was a script of two or three lines for *Speedball 2* – things like, 'Get ready!' I'd do those and then we'd look at each other because it had only taken 30 seconds. 'So, what else?' I feel embarrassed to say it now, but we tried to imagine what else there'd be in a crowd scene, and I parodied the Monty Python sketch with the salesman in the cinema. 'Albatross!' Obviously we weren't going to use that, so, to my shame, I put on the Italian-American accent and went... I'm not going to do it for you now."

A star performance in the making for the Bitmaps, *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* wouldn't have been *Speedball* without some injuries. Its final months saw Malone tasked with bolstering the art of *Cadaver*, leaving most of the punishing QA work to designer Matthews and programmer Trevellyan. It was a period famous for killing dozens of Suzo 'The Arcade' joysticks. This was no mean feat: the controllers were so tough that they could probably do a bit of killing themselves if swung at another player.

"It's one of those games where it feels like if you push the stick harder, the characters should move faster," notes producer **Simon Knight**. "And you were desperate to win. The joysticks took a pounding; if there was a lucky goal, you'd take it out on the hardware. We went through a lot of them, but [The Arcades] were definitely the best. I remember spending hours and hours pummelling one when we were doing *Xenon 2*."

But joysticks weren't all that broke during this period, as Trevellyan reveals: "People didn't make as big a deal of it with The Bitmap Brothers as they did with Id Software, but both adopted the same philosophy: 'It's done when it's done'. I'd hesitate to use the word 'genius' to describe a game designer, but Eric was extraordinary in terms of knowing how to balance a game so it was just so. He had great vision, but tuning it is what made the difference to the success of The Bitmap Brothers' games."

"Most QA was the job of the publishers, but we didn't trust them," **Mike Montgomery** adds. "Publishers think they can design games, but at that stage of development they had no idea at all. They'd try and change the odd thing, but we'd always very strongly say, 'No, we know what we're doing'. So we were late on everything. The money was different back then, too; we paid for a lot out of our own pockets and hoped the royalties came in and fixed it all."

With publisher QA in its early infancy, this handful of developers weren't just gauging whether the game was good for them; they were also gauging whether it was good for an audience they had next-to-no contact with. Yet, as Trevellyan explains, "There were difficult games, and there were difficult games which got bad reviews for it, but I don't think you'd ever get that from a game Eric tuned. *Speedball 2* was hard to beat but you could get a long way through it and beat a lot of teams."

"As a pretty green guy, though, that endless tweaking at the end to get it just right almost drove me crazy. It took a lot of time and playing. I kept thinking, 'Well, the game's done now.' But no, there were months to go."

As Boxall sums up: "Eric made the games great; Eric made the games late."

Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe was finally sent to mastering, and Trevellyan wouldn't work again with the Bitmaps until *The Chaos Engine 2*. "Naively," Trevellyan reflects, "I said I didn't want to work with Eric any more – and I regret that to this day."

"He is very charming and charismatic, and you want him to like you. When you're on his good side, you're basking in that warm glow. I didn't fall out with him but, having said that, I was taken at my word. I didn't work with him again, and it was a mistake I made early in my career which luckily didn't cost me my career."

The game was released in 1990 to a rapturous reception, to the surprise of pretty much no one. "The entire thing simply oozes a class and quality that is rarely found," declared C+VG, awarding the initial ST version 95%. "Dan Malone's graphics are nothing short of spectacular." Two issues later it would bump that score to 97% for the Amiga version, recognising the new pitch and sound effects. 96% in Zzap!64. 95% in CU Amiga, which found "absolutely nothing to fault". "It's the football game that could only ever exist on a computer screen," remarked Amiga Power for the budget release, by which time the game had scooped InDin, Gen 4 and Golden Joysticks awards, and been ported to numerous computers and consoles, both 8- and 16bit.

To the smug satisfaction of Amiga owners, though, it only really belonged on one platform. *Speedball 2* is a definitive Amiga game – some would argue *the* Amiga game. It's an experience made by and for artists, audiophiles, and those who like their arcade games to have a certain cinematic heft. It's not 'wrong' for other platforms, just off, like so many coin-ops and console games ported the other way. It's not fast like a Hurricane Kick on a SNES, or a Spin Dash on a Mega Drive, but like a fist through an inch of steel. A testament to the Amiga's power, then, but also to its quirks – its identity as a piece of hardware.

In August 1990, Gary Penn asked Matthews if *Speedball* could ever become a real-life sport (a notion teased by its celluloid ancestor, Rollerball, too). "It's too tough," scoffed the Bitmap, before offering: "The strange thing is, now that we've got [the game] behind us, it's almost like it really does exist."

This is because The Bitmap Brothers, a team with almost perfect stats – Programming, Vision, Tenacity, Brand – added a good few points to its Fiction when it picked up Dan Malone.

The comic-book artist from Ipswich never did work for 2000AD, but he drew his megacities and his perps as title screens and sprites. Together with Joseph's audio, his work sends the imagination high up into the nosebleeds of the stadium, through the unseen ranks of the transfer market, and out into the slums and boardrooms of Planet Speedball. We're there – like it really does exist – in a Bitmap Brothers universe. ■

COLLECTED WORKS

GOICHI SUDA

SUPER FIRE PRO WRESTLING SPECIAL

Developer/publisher Human Entertainment **Format** Super Famicom **Release** 1994

THE SILVER CASE

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** ASCII Entertainment (Remaster: Grasshopper Manufacture/NIS America) **Format** PSone (Remaster: PC, PS4) **Release** 1999 (Remaster: 2016 (PC), Early 2017 (PS4))

KILLER 7

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Capcom **Format** GameCube, PS2 **Release** 2005

NO MORE HEROES

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Marvelous Entertainment/Ubisoft/Rising Star Games **Format** Wii **Release** 2007

SHADOWS OF THE DAMNED

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2011

LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment/Kadokawa Games **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2012

KILLER IS DEAD

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Kadokawa Games/Marvelous USA/Deep Silver **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2013

LET IT DIE

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** GungHo Online Entertainment **Format** PS4 **Release** TBA

Grasshopper Manufacture's founder surveys a career packed with audacious ideas

By Chris Schilling

Photography **Will Ireland**

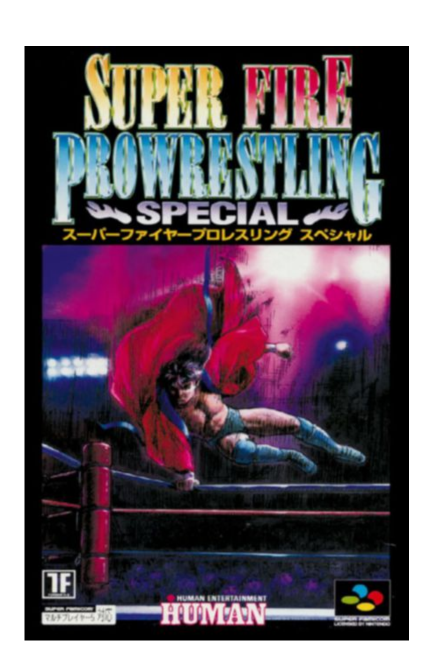




oichi Suda – better known to most by his pseudonym Suda51 – was working as a graphic designer when he was contacted by Sega to help create some promotional art for AM2's seminal 1992 arcade hit *Virtua Racing*. As he was shown around the office by Yu Suzuki, Suda noticed a lot of staff were of a similar age to him and dressed in casual clothes. "I'd always pictured game-makers wearing lab coats and toiling away, but actually they were just like me," he says. "It really lowered the hurdle for me to get into the game industry – before then, I had no knowledge or special skills that would have made me consider applying."

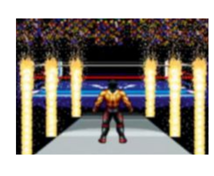
Almost a quarter of a century on, including 18 years as president of Grasshopper Manufacture, his passion for games is undimmed. In fact, as we invite Suda to discuss his defining moments in the game industry, he's anxious to ensure that we aren't about to prematurely consign him to the knacker's yard. "I do want to continue making games in the future," he says, pointedly, before going on to imagine a dream collaboration. "Dennaton Games!" he nods enthusiastically. "They're really cool: the Chemical Brothers of the game world. *Hotline Miami* is an amazing game. I can't believe that just two people made it."

Though he concedes that his managerial duties preclude him from being as hands-on as he'd ideally like, it's clear he still enjoys the process – though it's evidently cutting into his playing time. "Recently I've been trying to finish [PlayDead's] *Inside*, but I'm right in the middle of *The Silver Case*, so if I'm playing it while everyone's debugging, that wouldn't go down well." He laughs an impish chuckle, one of many as he reflects on a colourful, diverse and occasionally controversial career.



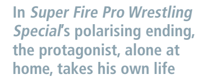
Suda's obsession with wrestling surfaced in the *Fire Pro* series, and it's been a recurring motif ever since

"IT'S BEEN 20 YEARS, BUT THOSE FEELINGS THAT PEOPLE HAD HAVE STAYED WITH THEM"









In *Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special*'s polarising ending, the protagonist, alone at home, takes his own life

SUPER FIRE PRO WRESTLING SPECIAL

Developer/publisher Human Entertainment
Format Super Famicom **Release** 1994

"For a while I was doing graphic design work, and I had many offers from people at places I was doing this contract work for: 'Hey, why don't you come work for us?' During this time, my wife said to me one day, 'We didn't come to Tokyo for you to do this. There's got to be something more that you want to do with your career.' And I said, 'You're right.' I opened up a magazine and looked at the classifieds, and saw there were two game companies that were hiring: one was Human Entertainment, the other was Atlus. So I put in two applications. I didn't even get called back by Atlus, but Human called me back and I got an interview. But for about a month I had not received any contact from them. My wife said, 'You need to give them a call,' but I didn't want to – I thought obviously they had a reason for not contacting me, right? She said, 'Well, you'll never know if you don't call.' And it turns out that the person who was in charge of dealing with my application had just forgotten. I called them and the guy who answered the phone heard the story and said, 'OK, wait a minute, let me go check.' I had actually been putting together a plan for a game, and it was for pro wrestling, because I was really into pro wrestling, and Human had a very famous series at the time called *Fire Pro Wrestling*. Coincidentally, the director of that series had just turned in his resignation letter, and they had no one there in the company to replace him. So I'm talking to them on the phone and they had known from my application that I was into pro wrestling. They said, 'Hey, why don't you come down for an interview?' I went in for the first interview, they liked me a lot, and called me back a few days after that for a second interview, where

I met people higher up in the company. It was all smooth sailing from there, and I got hired.

I took over on *Super Fire Pro Wrestling 3 Final Bout* as director, and I wanted to take the series to another place, now that I'd proven myself. Originally I was told that *Super Fire Pro 3* was going to be the last one Human ever made, but because it sold really, really well, they decided to make one more. Now, *Fire Pro* as a series was something that wrestling fans can really get into and enjoy. It was a simulation game for them. And I felt like in that regard it had always been really well made. So this time I wanted to focus more on the story. I had a narrative that I really wanted to tell, and I thought it would be really interesting, so I consulted with my boss and he said, 'Yeah, go for it.' He was a little philosophical, but it was something I really wanted to try to do.

The ending [which sees the game's protagonist kills himself] got a big response. At the time, there was no Internet, right? Back then, games had a little questionnaire inside the box that you filled in and mailed back. Human got tons of them, big boxes full. Some said things like, 'Die!', 'I want my money back!', 'I will never forgive you for this!', 'Bitch!' They were like cursed letters! It was such a negative response. The criticism we got back was immense. But within that, maybe ten or 20 per cent of the people said, 'That was really cool – thanks.' During my time in the industry I've met lots of people – even now – who come up to me and say, 'That was my favourite one.' It's amazing. Even though it's been 20 years, those memories and those feelings that people have towards the game have stayed with them."









An episodic follow-up to *The Silver Case, The Silver Case: Ward 25* was released in 2005 for mobile devices

THE SILVER CASE

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** ASCII Entertainment (Remaster: Grasshopper Manufacture/NIS America) **Format** PSone (Remaster: PC, PS4) **Release** 1999 (Remaster: 2016 (PC), early 2017 (PS4))

"After I left Human, I tried to get about ten people from there as my core staff at Grasshopper Manufacture. They didn't all come in at once; it was more gradual – this person, then that person, then this person and so on. We had to quickly think about what our first game should be. We realised that we had about a year, maybe a year and a half to put this thing out. At this point, there were five people within the company. I considered it firstly from a management perspective: what can five people reasonably create within this span of time? I was the director and the scenario writer, I had a couple of graphic artists, a programmer and a planner: that was the core group of five people who made the game. While at Human I made adventure games – you would probably call them visual novels – and so I knew exactly what went into them. For this one, I wanted to do something new, something original within the genre. I figured that writing the story was a large thing – that would essentially be more than half the game. But I wanted the programmers to be more involved with the graphical elements and presentation. I had them create windows that could be arranged and moved within a 4:3 display. So you've got windows that move, you have a cursor that comes in and locks onto things, you've got things switching around and moving within the background. Doing all this allowed us to give the programmers something more interesting to do, to have control over how the story was being portrayed, and how the game would look. The whole concept of giving the programmers a little bit of that area of control as well as this desire to make something new is what birthed the film window engine. No one had really ever made something like that before.

The original version was made by just five people, and I thought it was pretty good as it was. I thought we'd really accomplished something special there. That said, I began to think about people in the west, who never really got a chance to play this game. And so the original idea for doing a remaster or a remake came about nine years ago. The question, especially around that time, was: is there really a need for this? As you know, visual novels have an incredible amount of text, and so getting that translated properly, in a way that really expressed my vision, was something that really concerned me, and ▶



so it went on the back burner for a while. Then, about two years ago, a company called AGM [Active Gaming Media] approached me and said, 'We'd like to do a remake of *The Silver Case.*' For the translation part, they had three people in the company who were foreigners who had played the game, so they could triple-check it. They guaranteed me a perfect translation, and that really moved my heart. Also, I noticed that the scene overall has changed: indie games have become more popular, and I've noticed that more young people are willing to try games like visual novels, so it seemed to me that now was the right time to do it. I really felt a strong desire to bring *The Silver Case* to today's young gamers."

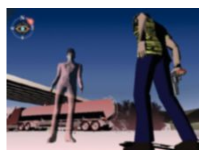
KILLER 7

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Capcom
Format GameCube, PS2 **Release** 2005

"The whole thing came completely out of the blue. One day, I just heard from [Shinji] Mikami: 'I want to meet you.' Which really surprised me – I mean, Mikami's a big deal, right? He told me to come to Osaka. So I'm sitting there in the Capcom offices waiting, the door opens and Mikami's there with these sunglasses on and he just says, 'I'm Mikami.' So my first impression was that he's kind of a scary guy! And then he talked for about one hour – the conversation was one-directional. A little bit was about games, but most of it was about other things.









British culture has heavily influenced Suda's work – from *Killer 7*'s references to The Smiths, to *No More Heroes* being named after the Stranglers song

And the last thing he said was, 'Let's make a game together.' Even before then, Mikami had always praised Human's games, mainly because the ideas in those games were the kind that you really didn't get so much from larger companies. Within the group that Mikami controlled, there was a guy named Shu Takumi – you know, the *Ace Attorney* guy. He was a fan of *The Silver Case* and Grasshopper, and he went to bat for me to Mikami. This group was called Development Group 4, they had five titles they were supposed to make for GameCube, and he basically said, 'One of these five is yours, and we're going to make it together.'

From the beginning, it was decided it would be an action-adventure game. Very early on, we had this idea of the *Killer 7*, of this person with multiple personalities. That was set pretty much from the very start. The issue was how to build gameplay around that concept. We made this special shader for the graphics, and then we came up with the on-rails movement system, and we built it out piece by piece from there. Originally, it was decided it would be an FPS for certain parts of the game. Because of my experience, I was more focused on the adventure game aspect, but whenever Mikami would play it, he'd say, 'We need to get this moving, speed things up a bit.' I feel that Mikami's biggest contribution was giving this feedback and giving it more of an action-game feeling and a better tempo.

The impact it had, I didn't expect at all. When we were making the game, all we were thinking about was making the game, thinking, 'How can we make this as good as possible?' So it was not really something that I considered in any way, shape or form. Throughout the development, I was protected by Mikami, I was taken under his wing. This guy, the man who created *Biohazard* – essentially a new genre, a new way to play – and he was giving me absolute freedom to create whatever I wanted! He actually laughed at some of the more shocking scenes; he thought they were hysterical. I assume he took that to the next level and protected me – I never got any pushback from Capcom personally. With that freedom he gave me, I knew I had to give 110 per cent and I knew I had to create something

worthy of having Mikami's name on it. I worked really, really hard to make sure that I didn't shame Mikami, that I didn't produce something that would reflect poorly upon him. I felt that I shouldn't actually worry about the sales numbers or about what kind of impact it might have. The only thing I could do as a creator was to make the best game I could. And I feel that paid off.

I hear from a lot of people that the game they most want me to remaster is *Killer 7*. All the time. So I'd like to do that someday. I'm blindly searching for a way for it to happen. Capcom is pretty co-operative, but because the game was made on GameCube — which is a very special, particular piece of hardware — it's really hard to bring it to modern consoles. Rather than it being a problem of budget, it's more a problem of technology. Provided we could find a way to figure out how to get over that technological barrier, then you never know."

NO MORE HEROES

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Marvelous Entertainment/ Ubisoft/Rising Star Games **Format** Wii **Release** 2007

"You can clearly see the influence from Mikami in my games after *Killer 7*. When we were making it, I would have lots of talks with Mikami, and he would explain various things to me, so I learned a lot about his approach to making an action game, but also how he thought about various aspects of game development in general. Before *No More Heroes*, there were two games that came out that I did for Namco Bandai as they were then [*Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked* and *Blood+: One Night Kiss*], and those served as the foundations of what became *No More Heroes*. At that point, I felt I had really figured out what I wanted to do in terms of action. I would describe Mikami as my 'master' — like I'm a swordsman and he's the guy who trains me to learn the techniques.

I honestly don't remember saying I wanted it to be as violent as *Manhunt 2*. For me, *Manhunt 2* was a really dark game, whereas *No More Heroes* had a pop sensibility to it. It's a world of violence, but you have that playful element to it — that's what I was aiming for. I'm not always trying to be outrageous or provocative. When we were first talking to Marvellous and discussed that the game was going to be on the Wii, instantaneously I thought, 'Well, the Wii Remote looks like a beam katana'. And the second idea came right after the first in a flash of inspiration: 'OK, then you charge it like this!' [Mimes shaking action] I thought: gamers all over the world are going to laugh about this — they're going to love it.

I didn't mean for the open world to be a joke! What happened is that I had this idea to have a small town that would have an open-world feel to it, and frankly we probably just tried to put in too much in too limited an amount of time. After that, it became seen as a joke, but I wasn't really aiming for that. By the same token, I feel that the world we created within the game maybe lent itself to becoming a joke."





Travis Touchdown was partly based on Jackass's Johnny Knoxville, who Suda reportedly wanted to voice the hero

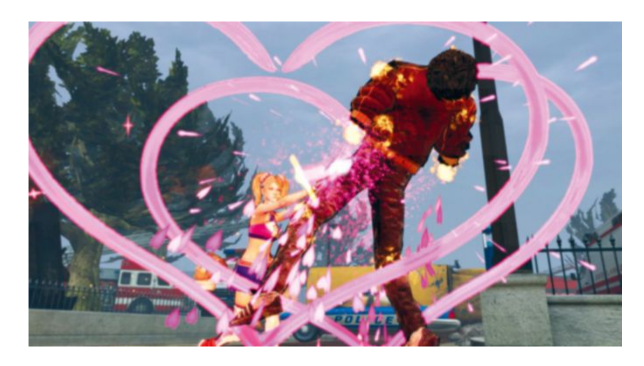
SHADOWS OF THE DAMNED

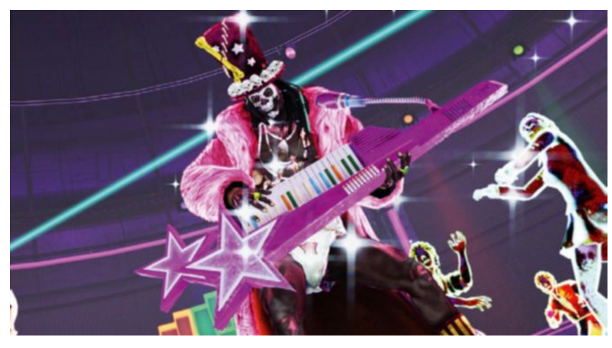
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2011

"I had this game plan from the very beginning for *Shadows Of The Damned*, and Mikami jumped in to help me with it. I was lead director, then Massimo [Guarini] came in and took over as director, and the



Suda is careful to ensure people are correctly credited for their contributions to his studio's games. *Damned*'s in-game fables seem to bear his fingerprints, but Suda insists that in fact they were all the work of director Massimo Guarini





Lollipop Chainsaw might not have been Suda's biggest hit with critics, but it's Grasshopper Manufacture's most successful release commercially by some distance

action parts specifically were fine-tuned by Mikami as the producer. Mikami and I both went out to start pitching the game to people. We got an agent and we went all over the place in America and really put a lot of effort into it. Finally, we went to EA and we gave them essentially a finished game plan. Bear in mind that we had no guns in the game originally, no guns whatsoever. And EA read it, and the first thing they came back with was: 'You need to put guns in the game.' Maybe that's just the reality of a Japanese developer working with a foreign publisher or something, but there were all these communication issues. I don't know if 'disappointed' is the right word to describe how we felt about *Shadows*. Both Mr Mikami and I are very proud of the game that we made, but the feeling we both had at the end of it was, 'Well, this wasn't quite the game we set out to make, was it?'

The Big Boner was a scenario that I had particular trouble with, mainly because I'd take it back to EA and they'd say, 'No, no, no.' There were like five or six rounds of this. An interesting thing within that, though, is that every time I'd write something, Massimo would add even more. The staff were really into it. So the Big Boner and all that kind of stuff came from Massimo more than me. He just kept adding to what was already there, and it just kind of got bigger and bigger!"

"THE FIRST THING EA CAME BACK WITH WAS: 'YOU NEED TO PUT GUNS IN THE GAME'"

Despite *Killer Is Dead*'s disappointing sales, its director, Hideyuki Shin, is now helming *Let It Die*

LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment/Kadokawa Games **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2012

KILLER IS DEAD

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** Kadokawa Games/Marvelous USA/Deep Silver **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2013

"*Lollipop Chainsaw* was a collaborative work. I feel like that game was more or less created by [Grasshopper] staff. My role was more of a producer, and a supervisor for some of the action parts. Warner Bros sent people over to work with us on it, and the Japanese publisher Kadokawa Games sent staff over, so it really was a collaboration between these three different companies. Warner Bros came to us and said, 'We want James Gunn to be involved with this.' Grasshopper staff wrote the original scenario, then James took it and did his thing, which came back, and then it came to me and I rewrote some of it. So there was all this back-and-forth during the process.

With *Killer Is Dead*, I knew when we were making it that there was going to be controversy about Gigolo Mode. I thought it might not be a good thing. But Kadokawa Games actually told us to put it in there. They said they wanted it. I know how foreign people are going to react to what we put out there. I wouldn't say I have regrets, necessarily. However, one thing I'd definitely say is that when *Killer Is Dead* was first announced and information started to come out, we had a lot of press meetings and they all wrote that up. Even now, people talk about it! I said it at the time, at PAX, the same thing about Gigolo Mode – I did hear that a lot of people were really negative about it. And that game had a fantastic combat system. It was made by a guy at Grasshopper called Hideyuki Shin, who was the director of the game and he put his heart and soul into it, and... I'm

starting to get worked up about it, so I'm not going to say much more.

Even though I wasn't as heavily involved [with the likes of *Lollipop Chainsaw* and *Killer Is Dead*], these games still carry my signature because I always do the planning at the very beginning. The original idea and planning – that's me. Even with *Shadows Of The Damned*, I wanted to be the director until the very end. But I'm the president of the company, with all these managerial roles to take care of, and there's all this paperwork that I have to do. It's come to the point where I just have to trust the staff I've hired and leave it in their hands to create something good. There's also the issue of having to write scenarios and things like that, which is very time-consuming, and so as things are progressing with certain projects, I have to step away from those and work on other things.

Yes, I would like to be more involved. However, as the company gets bigger, as our budgets increase, I need to be more mindful of all these different factors that come into it. One big one, of course, would be publishers – they always have a say in what's going to be made. And so because the budgets are bigger and there are all these out-of-control elements, I feel like it's a matter of course that I have to step away and leave things to the staff and be able to let things go like that. Because I've been doing this for 18 years now within this company. Because of the current trajectory of the company, it's just the way things have to be right now."

LET IT DIE

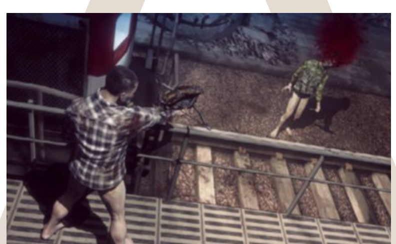
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher** GungHo Online Entertainment
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

"Probably the biggest change on *Let It Die* from when it started out as *Lily Bergamo* is that it's moved away from being a story-driven game. Because it has asynchronous online play, you really can't do a story-driven experience with that. Originally, the main character in *Lily Bergamo* was supposed to be this person called Tae. Now, in *Let It Die*, you – the player – are the main character.

I'm executive director on the game, which I guess means I'm sort of looking after everything! *Let It Die* is a game where everyone's come together and added their own ideas, and it's all moved on from there. It's not the type of game where one person is responsible. Grasshopper is now part of a group owned by GungHo Online Entertainment, so some of those guys are involved in it, too. This time, I've had a lot to do with the planning, and there'll be times when I say, 'I think we should do it like this,' but even in that situation, because we're leaving it more to the staff to figure out, they won't necessarily take my ideas into consideration.

There are definitely times where I'll call staff – not necessarily in a meeting – but I'll call them and say, 'Look, you're going to do it like this.' Speaking specifically about this game, originally when your player dies, they just had simple continue/quit options. But I really wanted this character we made called Kiwako to appear and direct the player. For things like that, I will put my foot down. It's a game where rhythm is very important, because it's a game that you're supposed to play for a while, and so these are the kind of areas where I feel like the granular details are really important. Any time I feel that's being affected, I'll definitely call over staff and say, 'Hey, let's do it this way.'" ■

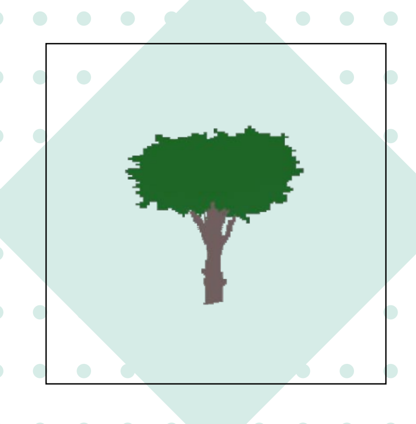




Grasshopper and GungHo are playing coy on *Let It Die*'s release date. It may even be out by the time you read this



THE MAKING OF...



PROTEUS

How Ed Key and David Kanaga channelled the British landscape to create a new kind of exploration game

By Lewis Gordon

Developers Ed Key, David Kanaga
Publisher Twisted Tree Games
Format PC, PS3, Vita
Origin UK/US
Release 2012

Fittingly, the inception of *Proteus* can be traced back to a walk. Specifically, around the village of Avebury in the southwest of England: it's a site of startling otherness, a village wrapped in three stone circles, as if layers of time and presence have been stacked atop one another. In the winter of 2008 **Ed Key**, lead designer of *Proteus*, was wandering through the neolithic monuments with his friend, Alex May, discussing how they could ease the process of designing landscapes."We were just walking and talking and Alex was saying, 'I really want to make a landscape renderer', and I was thinking, 'How could we make a landscape generator?' We started out working on something, put the two halves of it together, and then just had this thing that could generate a million landscapes."

Key would turn the technology that evolved from that conversation into *Proteus*, a game in which you wander around a procedurally generated island, soaking up the sights and sounds of the landscape as it passes through day, night, and the turning of the seasons. But the realisation of it wouldn't occur until **David Kanaga**, a composer and sound designer, came on board to provide the densely textured audio that brings *Proteus*' environments to life.

Prior to Kanaga's involvement, though, Key was working on *Proteus* in his spare time – a newly acquired luxury having recently quit the rigours of commercial videogame production. Citing both his growing disillusionment with the mechanisms of studio development and the realisation that he could go it alone, Key moved to the southwest of England with his girlfriend and got a job at a computer-aided design and manufacturing company. There was zero overtime and no weekend working, a situation that gave him the freedom to follow his own endeavours. "It was really cushy but pretty boring," he says. "And especially with this job, just having a lot of spare time and energy, I realised that I could start doing stuff."

Key began to explore various ideas surrounding the project. "I guess I wanted to make something with landscapes in, and something procedurally generated, but I didn't really know what it was going to be. I was thinking sort of a survival-ish game." An early version Key worked on with Raymond Cindric centred on a 16x16 sprite of a cat, viewed in thirdperson, exploring more densely settled environments. But after the pair drifted apart Key would redefine the vision. "It was always going to be fairly exploration heavy, but I think I got bored. I decided I wanted to make it firstperson – and less obviously retro."



After a primer on colour theory, Key was able to push the look of the game into the realm of "hyperreality", citing the artist Paul Nash and art deco as "big influences"

While the final game contains nothing as whimsical as a cat sprite, the processes involved

AN EARLY VERSION KEY WORKED ON CENTRED ON A 16X16 SPRITE OF A CAT, VIEWED IN THIRDPERSON

in thrashing out that look led Key to his first major breakthrough. "The tree was the thing that defined the look of it in the end. As it stands now, the trees in the game are a cluster of camera-facing sprites with this hand-drawn ragged edge. And the trunks are just ragged outline sprites that kind of fitted together. Because there's no lighting, everything just fuses together into the same blobs of colour."

This approach enabled Key to be more impressionistic with the world he was building. "I was studying a lot of the plants fairly closely, but then doing a lot of the sprites for them in an almost improvisational kind of way. And I started pushing the colours a little bit towards the unrealistic or hyperrealistic end of things, such as the pink sunsets and the yellow sky in the afternoon of the summer, kind of kicking away from my tendency to be quite literal with colour choices." Key's efforts resulted in a striking visual aesthetic, built using the simplest of means and, crucially, eschewing graphical fidelity for an unmistakable sense of place.

Following the refinement of the game's visual approach, Key began to look for the next component of *Proteus*: the music. He did so on indie developer forum Tigsource, where he found Kanaga's work. One of Kanaga's releases, *Scenes From Arcturus*, immediately resonated with Key, partly because of the tonal similarities it shared with Brian Eno's 1992 album The Shutov Assembly. In an early email exchange Key told Kanaga how, when he was younger, he would listen to the album while he played *Ultima VII*, and so associated it with exploring the virtual forests found in the game. Key, in fact, used a track from that Eno album as a temporary soundtrack for an early video of *Proteus*. "Some of David's stuff had similar sort of floaty, pitch-bendy stuff in it. And Brian Eno's thing is lots of layers of tape loops and strange things, so, yeah, it was pretty immediate."

Kanaga also felt an immediate kinship with the project, warmly recalling his first impressions of *Proteus*. "I fell in love with the visuals really quickly. It was just such a beautiful, childhood love or something. I just got lost in it." With a determination that his audio should reflect the visuals of the game as purely as possible, Kanaga employed an almost improvisational approach to composition: "I was just, like, 'I'm gonna play the game and try to sort of translate the spirit of the visuals as I feel them'." Kanaga also brought his own experiences of landscape to the fore, channelling his Pacific Northwest roots into the game. "I grew up in the countryside in Oregon and I think that I read my own intimacy with the landscapes into how I was reading the game. It's not as hilly there, but it's kind of similarly northern in terms of the climate, and it's very lush – a lot of evergreens."

Crucially, Kanaga's own ideas about the functionality of music – of its need for a specific context – also found form in the world of *Proteus*. "All the sounds in the game, their function is to exist in a community with each other," Kanaga tells us. "But also, crucially, with the input of the player. Because, for me as a player, the most explicit connection to the community of the game is how you're actually touching it." In *Proteus*, that touching of the game stems simply from the player's presence – of existing in relation to ▶

the landscape they're a part of – which in turn shapes Kanaga's amorphous sounds. The player's proximity to particular objects, be that a tree or a building, or their altitude level, shapes what sounds they're hearing, creating an ever-shifting, dynamic soundtrack. "There are probably times in the final version of *Proteus* where it's playing, like, 20 things at once," Key says. At times, the sheer density of sounds can lead to the game feeling overloaded, particularly during the summer portion of the game, but Key maintains that it was a conscious decision, designed to reflect the heightened sensory stimulation of that time of year. "We deliberately made it so it feels kind of overwhelming. We weren't trying to make something realistically immersive. It's an impressionistic-slash-expressionistic immersion that is subjective; whether it's pleasant or unpleasant to be hemmed in by trees, and if the air's really humid, you can choose to be overwhelmed."

Creating a specific feel for each of the seasons presented its own challenges. The early stages of Kanaga's involvement were spent on spring, but as each subsequent season was introduced, the complexity of the project began to unfold. "At first it was very much, 'OK, we've got this one space and we're gonna do all these changes for this single static space," Kanaga says. "But then it became day and night time and so different systems needed to exist for that. And then we multiplied that again by the seasons, where we needed to have all of these different systems recomposed per season." An even greater challenge lay in maintaining consistency across the contrasting seasons. "One of the major difficulties was trying to take the diversity of musical moods and make sure they all remain angles of one mood," Kanaga says. "But *Proteus* has this poetic, placid temperament that exists throughout the whole game. There's a beautiful unity to it, which is very much to Ed's credit."

The temperament Kanaga speaks of may have resulted from the pair working on it in their spare time until the final year of development, allowing for periods of creativity to occur organically. Key, based in Cambridge, would often wake up to find ZIP files of "mysterious sounds" that Kanaga had been working on the night before in California. Importantly, there were none of the pressures that accompany commercial game development. "This is a thing I feel acutely now – that sense of feeling more pressured to make something, when previously we were both just doing it in our spare time," Key says. "The vibe of playing it, and the point where the soul of the game was being created, could well have been influenced by the fact that the development process was pretty leisurely."

That vibe is one that hasn't yet been matched. *Proteus*, to this day, remains a singular force in its uncompromising meditations and reflections on the natural world and our own place within it. But following its release the game was met with the predictable groans of those who refused to classify it as a game, an opinion derived, primarily, from its lack of conventional goals. "It was kind of annoying at first," Kanaga says, "but then it became wonderful because it created controversy and discourse. I don't think I disliked any of it except just the idea that it wasn't a game, but even that was fine because I thought it was a lively discourse that was happening." *Proteus*, along with the likes of *Dear Esther* and *Journey*, led the charge for games where atmosphere and narrative were valued over mastery of skill. "At the time there's a delight in feeling confrontational or competitive about things," Kanaga says, "but in retrospect I think it was very much part of the zeitgeist. All of those things were really exciting, too – all these different angles of looking at this same idea, stripping games of goals, which I think could be sort of ground zero for games."

But *Proteus* is a game of goals, however small they might be. They're scattered around the environment's reactive wildlife, the progression that occurs through the seasons and, ultimately, in the game's ethereal ending. Key recalls an important moment in his own realisation of how the game functioned while at the 2012 Indie Games Festival: "I was watching people play it and they were saying things like, 'Oh, I saw the frog, and then I followed the frog, and the frog took me to a tower, and then I looked at something else.' People were describing these chained-together experiences and attributing intentionality to them that wasn't there. I guess we managed to make something that sort of allows you to hitch a ride on these threads of curiosity, just the gentlest of forward pulls on these things, and it's part of why it works."

Key's right, of course, but *Proteus* operates on a deeper level, too. Just as Kanaga brought his own experiences of his native Oregonian landscape to the development process, people find a way of reading their own memories and feelings into *Proteus*' surreal island. And while Key is humbled by, and grateful for, the game's enduringly warm reception, he wasn't quite prepared for the impact it would have on his personal life. "*Proteus* was the first indie game that I released on my own and it was kind of like a lightning strike of unexpected popularity. I think I found it quite hard to reintegrate that back into my personality, to kind of assimilate it." He now appears ready to move on, though. Working on his next project, *Forest Of Sleep*, full time thanks to the success of *Proteus*, it'll be fascinating to see whether lightning strikes twice. ■



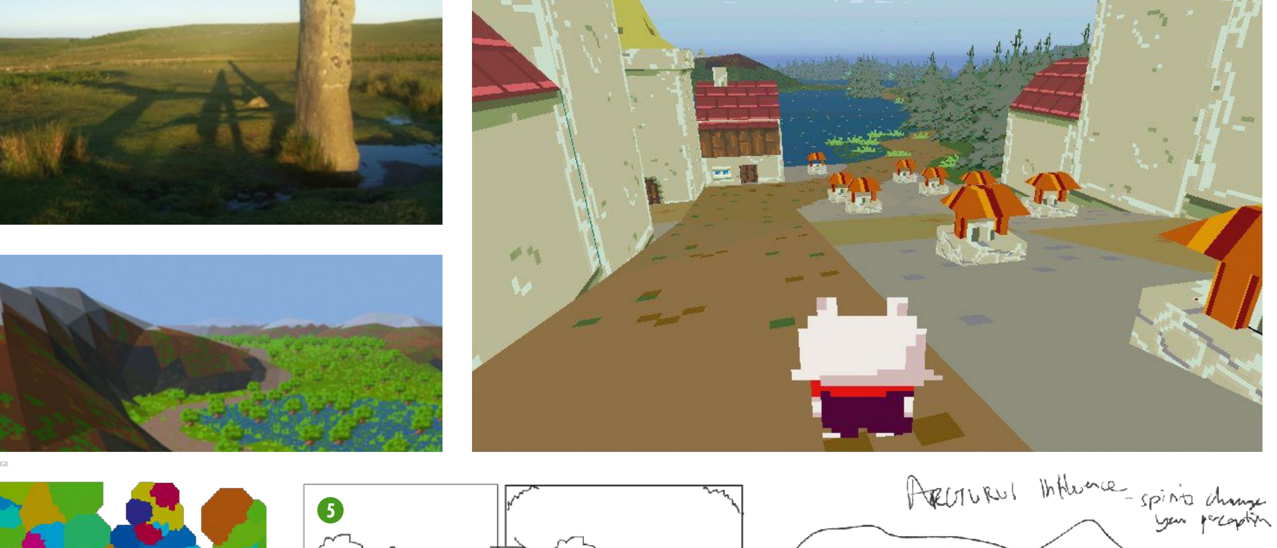
Ed Key
Lead designer

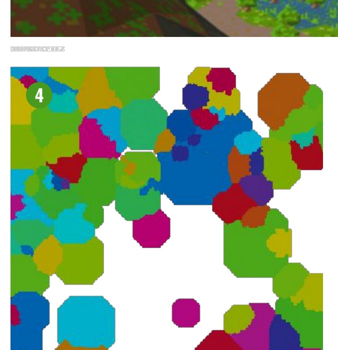
***Proteus*, along with a few other titles, encouraged a style of play less focused on the mechanics of player input. How do you feel about *Proteus*' place in that history?**
Well, in a real way, it's still all about the input – there's a tight loop of action and reaction from the game, which is part of what makes it work, but of course the tempo and reward structure is massively different. I'm proud of that, but sometimes wish other people had run with that more! I'm always a bit sad to see an exploration game based on collecting orbs.

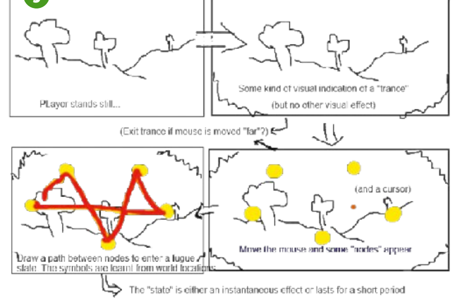
The port of *Proteus* to PS3 and Vita included Trophies, an element that feels almost antithetical to the tone of the original vision. Were you concerned about the impact these features would have on the game?
The Achievements and Trophies were definitely weird to design. I don't know if they were wholly successful but some people reported that they enjoyed them. Maybe I'd have made them less willfully obscure if I'd had more confidence that people who didn't care would just ignore them, and that people who are into them would find them more ritualistic to perform and less obscure to figure out.

***Proteus: Artefact Edition*, released this year, contains many physical objects relating to the game – what were your aims with it?**
I really like David's phrase of an "expanded universe". We tried to pack it with weird stuff that was a combination of oblique fragments of the game and its development, plus things that extend it, like the "field guide" and cards, kinda softening the edges of it. We – incorrigibly – kept it mostly unexplained, so you have to do a bit of work digging through it to put it together.

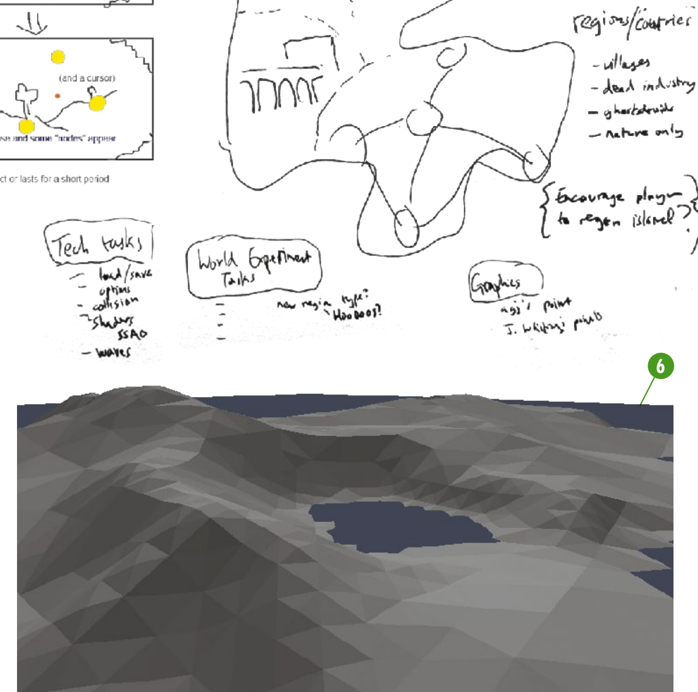












1 Photographic inspiration: a standing stone in Dartmoor National Park. ***Proteus*** is littered with similar monuments, imbuing a sense of the deep past.
2 Key experimented with an over-the-shoulder view – of a cat, no less – for a while, as well as a quicker pace of play.
3 Originally, the game was going to be more expansive, with different regions and villages linked by road networks.
4 An example of the top-down schematic used to construct the various elements of the game's landscape, the different blobs of colour representing specific terrains.
5 This minigame, a cross between the environmental puzzles of ***The Witness*** and the spells of ***Black & White***, was shelved midway through development, although the trance element finds life in the game's pulsating night sky.
6 'Nodeland' was an alternative title Key and Kanaga toyed with for the game, inspired by the undulating environments being constructed by randomly placed node points – markers around which the landscapes are built



STUDIO PROFILE

REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS

The developer-turned-publisher that refuses to play by the rules

By Ben Maxwell

Photography **Joby Sessions**

There's a trio of homebrew stills, each containing a different-coloured beer, nestled at the back of Rebellion's cavernous warehouse. The vast space, which is attached to Rebellion's offices and must be passed through to reach the company's in-house green-screen and facial-capture studio, is filled with 24 years of company history, abandoned devkits, and memorabilia from 2000AD – the British comic publisher that Rebellion acquired, appropriately, in 2000. This treasure trove might record nearly two-and-a-half decades of Rebellion's evolution, but it's those stills that best represent the do-it-yourself nature of this plucky British stalwart's worldview.

"I suppose the thing that drives Rebellion's psyche, if you like, is a sense of being fiercely independent. Doing things our own way," head of creative **Tim Jones** tells us once we're safely back in the warmth of the office. "I've been here for nearly 20 years now, and a big part of why I'm still here is because I feel very at home with that sensibility and approach to things."

That ethos has been part of the company's makeup since the very beginning, when brothers Chris and **Jason Kingsley** founded the company in 1992. "When we first started Rebellion, we wanted to make our own games," Jason says. "In those days you could pitch a game with a sketch on one side of a sheet of dot-matrix paper, and somebody would pay you an incredibly low amount of money to make it, then publish it and earn all the money. But as young men interested in making games, that was fine: we were paid a little bit of money to effectively do our hobby. I don't think [that outlook] has changed, but we've been through some quite severe transitions."

Perhaps the most profound change came about when the pair realised that, as pleasant as receiving a modest income for relative creative freedom was, work-for-hire projects were a safer bet when it came to keeping the company afloat.

"We did some really original games, like *Blade Warrior* and *Eye Of The Storm*, and all sorts of interesting conceptual things that were moderate commercial successes but didn't really go on to do anything," Kingsley explains. "And then as the company grew it became obvious work-for-hire was the way to go. There were a lot of barriers to getting your game to market at that time: you couldn't just publish on the original PlayStation – you had to go through a publisher, and it was a fairly onerous and restrictive route."

As a result, and despite its name, Rebellion became increasingly reliant on the work it did for





Head of creative Tim Jones (left), and CEO Jason Kingsley, who co-founded Rebellion with his brother, Chris, in 1992

the establishment. And while there were highs along the way, this setup – predictably, perhaps – didn't sit particularly well with the studio's outlook. Tied to this restlessness was a growing realisation that many of Rebellion's employers cared considerably less about the quality of the finished product than they did quarterly financial results, and often didn't share the studio's vision.

"We went through some ups and downs with our work-for-hire. We made some really good



Founded 1992
Employees 200
Key staff Jason Kingsley (CEO, co-founder), Chris Kingsley (CTO, co-founder), Tim Jones (head of creative), Chris Payton (head of art)
URL www.rebellion.co.uk
Selected softography *Neverdead*, *Sniper Elite* series, *Battlezone*, *Rogue Trooper*, *Dredd Vs Death*, *Aliens Vs Predator 2000*
Current projects *Sniper Elite 4*, unannounced project

Today, enviably, it has no publisher attachments and is able to self-fund all of its work.

"These days everything we're doing is Rebellion-owned IP – and self-published and funded," Jones says, clearly happy with the arrangement. "And that runs through to using our own engine and building our own technology."

"Hopefully, people will notice that the past five years of our game output has been significantly improved," Kingsley adds. "Certainly, from a commercial perspective things have gone incredibly well for us."

Indeed, it has been an eventful year for Rebellion. While it has yet to announce any

"WE'RE COMPETING WITH GAMES THAT COST UPWARDS OF $100M TO DEVELOP. WE HAVE A FRACTION OF THAT BUDGET"

games, and we made some moderate games that missed the mark entirely," Kingsley admits. "We got to the stage of thinking, 'This is ridiculous. We're making games that aren't being positioned in the way we think they should be in the marketplace.' *Rogue Warrior*, for example – which I still maintain has the best sweary outro credits of any game ever – was originally conceived as a parody of '80s action movies. But it wasn't positioned that way, so everybody thought it was taking itself seriously. It wasn't a particularly good game, but it fell *totally* flat. It was developed in a very short amount of time and we got a lot of really bad – completely fairly – reviews for it. I don't think it was utterly terrible, but it wasn't what we wanted to be doing."

Trapped by the cycle that originally shored up the company, the Kingsleys now found themselves kicking back against the system again, formulating plans to steer them back towards the vision on which they had originally founded Rebellion. Over time, the team began to balance out its work-for-hire projects with original games.

details, the company is expanding its publishing remit to other studios ("We're working with a few developers at the moment," Kingsley says. "It's nice to be able to reflect how we would have liked to be treated – we're trying not to make any of the mistakes that were done to us"), and it has completed two high-profile projects of its own. *Battlezone*, a PSVR launch title and the studio's first foray into VR, was first out of the gates, while *Sniper Elite 4* will land in 2017. They represent the studio's most refined output yet, which is all the more significant for the fact that Rebellion's games have often been criticised for containing bugs or a perceived lack of polish.

"I think we have a bit of an unfair reputation in some people's minds for releasing games that aren't quite as polished as they could be," Kingsley says. "But quite frankly, we're competing in the worldwide market with games that are costing upwards of $80 to $100 million to develop. We have a tiny fraction of that budget, and yet we're still making games that other people move away from our release slot for, ▶





Rebellion's back catalogue includes games that use characters from the 2000AD universe, but the company has been careful to avoid focusing entirely on this potentially lucrative trajectory. Kingsley is clear that he doesn't want Rebellion labelled "the 2000AD studio"

and hopefully will chart really well. I'm very proud of that. We're up there with the biggest games, which is brilliant. Of course, from the point of view of players and pro reviewers, it doesn't matter how much the game cost to develop – it's irrelevant. But at the same time it would be nice to be recognised for making a game that's *nearly* as good as 'Massive Game X' for a tenth of the price [laughs]."

***Battlezone* is convincing** evidence of what appears to be a new phase for Rebellion. Meanwhile, *Sniper Elite 4*'s rescheduled release date (it was originally due to launch just after *Battlezone*) is an encouraging demonstration of the studio's intent. But Kingsley is well aware of the challenge that faces the studio.

"The problem when you're first starting to fund your own games and get them out there is the amount of QA you can put in. I think we underestimated the importance and the value of very deep QA in the past – and sometimes, when we've been working with partners, they've had a deadline to meet – but we've got the biggest QA department we've ever had, and we use external QA people, too. Now we're in a situation where it's up to us. With *Battlezone* and *Sniper Elite 4*, we took a look at it and I said to our teams, 'Can we do these both at the same time?' And the answer was no. So I asked if it would be useful for *Sniper Elite* to have a few more months of polish. And the team said, 'Of course it would, absolutely.' Dev teams can always spend more time polishing things up, so I'm hoping that *Sniper Elite 4* will be the least buggy thing we've ever released!" Kingsley's willingness to quip about such things is refreshing, but it's also representative of the studio's slightly skewed take on development.

"We have, to some extent, a kind of British, punky edge to the way that we make things," Jones muses when we ask him about this aspect of the company. "They might not have the same kind of, let's say, corporate polish that you might see in a 1,000-person game from Ubisoft. But at the same time, we're up there with those guys in the top ten or top five, and we get a big kick out of that, as you can imagine. We're punching above our weight, I suppose."

"We almost feel slightly isolated," Kingsley says. "I've never sought to make games that win awards. I've always wanted to make games that were *fun* to play, and were interesting and challenging. We've always had a reputation for making quite hard games – with *Battlezone* recently, a lot of people are going, 'This is a great game, but boy is it hard.' Maybe we got the difficulty level slightly wrong with that one. But I've always wanted gameplay to factor very highly in what we do. Somebody saying the game is really good is better than winning a gong or an award. Perhaps. I mean, it's always nice to win awards as well, but we never really chase them."

He pauses, thinking. "Maybe one could say that we're interested in pursuing low art, rather than high art. But when we make a game idea, we try to make the best, most fun game we can. And maybe it's just in Chris and my, and the team's, genetics that we don't want to make a game about challenging issues. We want to make games about escapism and fun. And that's harder to win critical acclaim for. At the end of the day, what actually matters is that we sell enough copies of our games to get some money in to keep the doors open and make some more new games. The rest of it is gravy, ultimately."

"WE WANT TO MAKE GAMES ABOUT ESCAPISM AND FUN. THAT'S HARDER TO WIN CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR"

For all its success, and the not-inconsiderable growth over the years, Rebellion remains the videogame industry equivalent of the characterful microbrewery elicited by those hidden stills. And despite a number of acquisitions and expansions – not least 2000AD, a trio of book-publishing houses, and what is now Rebellion's Runcorn studio – it has no desire to transform into a hulking international brewing company.

"I don't want to get too much bigger in terms of numbers of people," Kingsley says. "I'd like to get more ambitious in our titles, but that doesn't mean making $80 million games. It does perhaps mean trying new genres or going slightly outside of our comfort zone – which is partly what *Battlezone* was. I think there are a lot of games out there that should be good, but have somehow lost their soul. It's almost like they're made by so many people, and are so perfected, that they've somehow polished out every aspect that makes them interesting. They can be 'blandified' down to a lowest common denominator, and I think that can be dangerous.

"So I'd like to think that we're dedicated to games that are very focused on doing one or two things well. If it's sniping, then it's sniping done as best as we can do it – with stealth and little bit of clambering around, of course. But overall I just want to make good games." ■



❶ The cast of *Neverdead*, an action game in which your depleting life bar is represented by loss of limbs until you're just a head. ❷ Rebellion bought the rights to Elixir Studios' *Evil Genius* in 2006 and intends to cook up a sequel. ❸ PSVR launch title *Battlezone* represented Rebellion's first commercial foray into VR. It's a solid platform on which to build for future VR productions. ❹ While there's been little critical acclaim for the *Sniper Elite* series, it has a huge following. *Sniper Elite 4* looks set to raise the bar. ❺ 2015's *Zombie Army Trilogy* pulled *Sniper Elite*'s themes into undead territory

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

FIFA 17 PS4
EA reckons The Journey, *FIFA 17*'s singleplayer story mode, wouldn't have been possible before *FIFA*'s move to the Frostbite engine, since only now can it render things that aren't football stadiums. Having played through our debut season as Alex Hunter, we can see what it was getting at, but couldn't that processing grunt have been put to more creative use than all these dressing rooms and training pitches? Perhaps the drunken threesome in a Berkshire Holiday Inn comes in *FIFA 18*.

Stardew Valley PC
Eric Barone's sweetly meditative country-life sim may not have struck quite the same chord with some as it did with PC-only players, but that's a question of novelty; this sort of game has been part of console owners' lives for decades, after all. But despite its obvious influences, *Stardew Valley* has an identity all its of own, and when the console versions finally appear, we may not be able to resist falling back in.

Really Bad Chess iPhone
Controversial game designer Dave Sirlin once had the gall to make a game called *Chess 2* which, he claimed, would fix the flaws inherent in the sport of kings. Zach Gage takes the opposite tack, taking chess and purposely ruining it. Our current ranked-match game saw us start with seven bishops and three queens, while our CPU opponent had seven pawns. Things even up as you progress until, eventually, your foe gets the god-mode treatment while you suffer with the scraps. A delightfully subversive spin on the original classic.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Genre politics

Those of you old enough to remember the days when we bought music from actual, like, *shops* will know how useful genre could be. It was a handy way of finding what you were looking for – a way for the shopkeeper to categorise, and the shopper to home in on, different flavours of music.

Perhaps the same is true of games, though our retailers have never paid too much heed to genre. Pop into your local second-hand store and you'll find *Nier* nestled next to a *NASCAR* game, *Street Fighter* next to *Syndicate*. Perhaps it's for the best: on the evidence of this month's Play, genre has never mattered less.

Take, for instance, *Titanfall 2* (p112). This is, on the face of it, a sci-fi FPS. It has a great big robot on the box, and an arsenal of wonderful guns on the disc inside it. But as a game it almost defies categorisation, a brainy puzzle-platformer with time-travel elements in which it often feels like shooting things is the last thing on the design team's mind.



Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare (p110) similarly bucks convention. Yes, you shoot things. A lot. But this is also a game of walking, talking and building relationships. It's a game whose greatest moments come when you are in the cockpit of a starfighter. It's the least *Call Of Duty*-like *Call Of Duty* game to date.

Plenty of other games simply defy categorisation. What can we call *Hitman* (p114) that doesn't overlook its greatest achievement – that it has matured and improved over the course of its seven-month episodic run? Arkane styles *Dishonored 2* (p102) as an 'immersive sim', an offputtingly dreary way of describing one of the most intricately designed games of the year. Genre can be useful shorthand, certainly. But this broad church is getting bigger and bigger, to the extent that shorthand is no longer fit for purpose.

Dishonored 2

Developer Arkane Studios
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

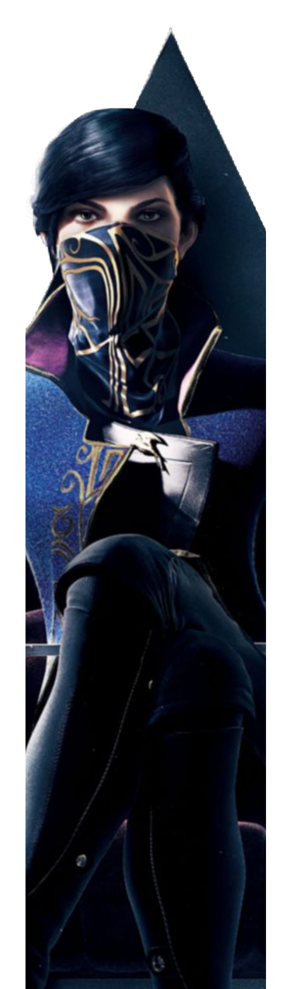
The key to any successful stealth mission, surely, is to maintain the element of surprise. The first *Dishonored* dropped out of nowhere, playfully choking crowds of delighted players who had no idea how good the game would turn out to be. But the sequel, burdened with the weight of sky-high expectations, lacks its predecessor's tactical advantage. So it's especially frustrating to discover that many of *Dishonored 2*'s best surprises have been squandered in the intense publicity drive that led up to its release. Dust storms, the Clockwork Mansion and its incumbent mechanical soldiers, the Timepiece – each a game-changing revelation from a formidably creative team, but whose impact has been diminished by the modern marketing trend of showing customers everything they're going to get before they get it. Even though there aren't many surprises left to mine, the game remains an extravagant, imaginative plaything fit for an Empress – or, indeed, a Lord Protector.

In *Dishonored 2* you begin as Emily Kaldwin, the girl from the first game who's now grown up and taken her assassinated mother's title as Empress of the Empire of the Isles. Now bored and disillusioned with ruling life, she's protected by Corvo Attano, the formerly mute protagonist and, the sequel confirms, her father. A short way into the game – in yet another sequence that was shown, in almost its entirety, prior to release – you're offered the choice of playing as either Emily or Corvo. While you'll tackle the same missions as either assassin, your decision makes subtle changes to the way the central story is told. A more profound difference, however, is in how the game plays when tackled with the pair's distinct suites of supernatural abilities.

Corvo retains the sextet of powers he was gifted by the Outsider in the first game: Blink, Possession, Bend Time, Dark Vision, Windblast, and the vermin-summoning Devouring Swarm. While settling back into them feels comfortingly familiar, a revamped upgrade system means that each power can become considerably more potent than it ever was before. More than that, the options available can even change the character of some abilities as you bolster them. For example, upgrading Blink in the first game simply gave you a few extra metres of range to play with when teleporting, but here you can add augmentations that let you stop time entirely, or even deliver a fatal kick to enemies as you emerge from zipping through space.

Those looking for a fresher experience should opt for Emily, however. Where Corvo is optimised for close-quarters encounters, stealthy or otherwise, Emily's powers are predominantly built around range and manipulation. She shares Dark Vision with Corvo, which in both cases can be upgraded to show item and enemy positions as well as enemy paths. Her Far Reach power is also a variation on Blink, but leaves Emily visible when she moves between positions (in its basic form, at least), meaning a little extra care is necessary when choosing your route. Emily can eventually also yank objects and people towards her, letting her incapacitate enemies in midair.

Even though there aren't many surprises left to mine, the game remains an extravagant, imaginative plaything



The rest of her powers are more specialised. Doppelgänger creates one or more copies that can fight alongside you or confuse enemies. Mesmerize conjures up a Void spirit to bewitch anyone nearby so you can slip by or slit throats. Shadow Walk sees you take on the form of a wispy spirit that can move unnoticed or tear enemies limb from limb. And the remarkable Domino power allows you to tether enemies together, the bonded foes sharing the same fate as a ripple of consequence emanates out from whoever you knock unconscious, decapitate or ignite.

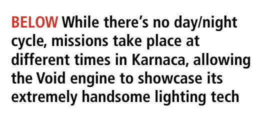
The effects of combining these powers are as enthralling as they are numerous. You could, for example, Domino a group of tough enemies to your own, unprotesting doppelgänger before callously executing her. Or instead, leave a building full of enemies convinced of your death as they slay your duplicate and you move past in a billow of smoke. For the imaginatively cruel, a barbaric combination of the two is also an option.

Given the broad tactical range, it's encouraging that *Dishonored 2* accommodates players' changing whims – or, at least, the fallout from errors of judgment – to a much greater extent than the first game, cheerfully segueing between silent non-lethality and brutal combat. Despite their shadowy demeanours, Emily and Corvo are both proficient combatants, and the sword- and gunplay feel satisfyingly weighty and skilful. But the sequel is also more supportive of anyone who would prefer to let neutralised guards return to their families at the end of day, and to that end it's now possible to knock enemies unconscious via drop attacks, or grab them after parrying mid-fight before shoving them away or choking them – though, disappointingly, taking an enemy hostage in this manner doesn't prevent their allies from murdering them to get to you.

Such inconsistencies are infrequent, but the few that remain undermine what is otherwise convincingly smart AI. Enemies and civilians continually comment on their situations, often referencing things you've done at an earlier point in the game or something that you've changed in their immediate vicinity. Soldiers may become suspicious if they spot an open door that was previously closed, for example, and they'll notice if a colleague goes missing even if they didn't actually witness you dragging him off into the shadows. Once alerted, guards will search areas thoroughly using dangerously unpredictable routes. It's jarring, then, when characters react in a more binary fashion: on two ▶

ABOVE Parrying enemies at the right moment will knock them off balance, buying you a little time or opening up a window in which to grab them. Once held, they can be thrown at other enemies, or choked unconscious. LEFT Here, three Domino-tethered enemies expire after the captain directly in front of us struck and killed a soldier we were holding hostage. You can tether up to four enemies at a time, expanding your options in crowded areas





BELOW While there's no day/night cycle, missions take place at different times in Karnaca, allowing the Void engine to showcase its extremely handsome lighting tech



ABOVE *Dishonored 2*'s character models are exquisite, and look even more weathered and world-worn than the first game's chiselled cast



separate occasions we intervene in situations where an aggressive party is shaking down a civilian, who then runs off screaming for more guards. Some thanks.

At least it's easy to escape escalating situations by taking advantage of Karnaca's incredible architecture. The smoggy, whale-oil-powered streets of Dunwall instilled a powerful sense of place, but the fading, dilapidated capital city of Serkonis feels steeped in real history. With no rat plague to clear them, the streets here are relatively busy, teeming with fishermen, gangs, religious fanatics and surly, royally appointed law enforcers. There is, however, an epidemic of bloodflies – parasites that nest in bodies – and many buildings have been sealed to slow their proliferation. These condemned apartments double up as buzzing, itch-inducing corridors through which you can move unseen.

But pest-ridden homes are just one way to avoid detection in the vertiginously constructed Karnaca. Sewers, basements, pipelines, suspended railways, precarious cliff faces and even power lines provide a web of potential routes through every area, and during our second playthrough we're still finding rooms, passageways and rooftops that eluded us the first time round. The dense richness of the environments, mixed with the dizzying potential for creative assassinations teed up by Corvo and Emily's powers, upgrades and expanded Bone Charm system (see 'Calcium efficiency'), means you'll want to play the game through at least twice to experience its full breadth. And that's even before you square up to the optional No Powers mode, which will test even the most proficient assassins.

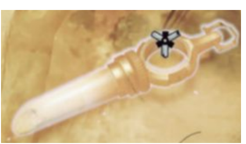
The campaign itself is relatively compact – it took us around 15 hours to reach the credits during our initial run as Emily – and the sometimes crowded story that's been squeezed into its ten chapters will be better understood by those who tackled *Dishonored*'s The Knife Of Dunwall and The Brigmore Witches DLC. But the campaign is also stuffed with ideas, and its continual reinvention is almost disorienting, such is the frequency of each new arrival. Arkane sets up unique rules and mechanics for each foray into the city, every combination requiring a different style of play.

And even though many of the surprises have been spoilt, toying with each sandbox's unique rules is as fascinating as it is joyful. If you're an impetuous type, some of the challenges you'll face along the way may seem like difficulty spikes, but a combination of thorough exploration and careful investigation will always arm you with information that tips the odds in your favour. Doing so will also lead to the discovery of some imaginative side-quests and, of course, more involved – and poetically cruel – ways to eliminate your marks without ending their lives.

Despite a handful of minor issues, then, and occasionally patchy framerates in particularly busy areas, *Dishonored 2* is consistently remarkable. And not just for its boundless invention and beguiling world – that the game manages to feel so disarmingly original even in the wake of its groundbreaking predecessor and excessive pre-launch exposure is its greatest surprise. And with the forthcoming New Game+ and custom difficulty settings, *Dishonored 2*'s exceptional execution threatens to keep players in its chokehold for a long time to come.

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Plunging into Karnaca's rich culture is a pleasure, and every aspect of the city – whether it's the architecture, the conversations of its residents, or the volumes of letters and journals to read – reveals something



CALCIUM EFFICIENCY

As in the first game, you must collect Runes – located using Empress Jessamine's heart – to upgrade your powers and skills. Bone Charms, meanwhile, proffer other advantages, such as increased climbing speed, greater lung capacity or unnerving enemies to the point at which they more regularly fumble a grenade throw. Now you can also craft your own Runes and Bone Charms from raw whalebone that you find around the levels. You can build in up to four traits, and even stack the same one for additional potency, but before you fully upgrade your crafting ability there's a chance of creating a corrupted charm. These imperfect carvings offer advantages that come with a cost: Armored Bones, for example, reduces both the damage you take but also your movement speed.

Post Script

Interview: Harvey Smith, co-creative director, Arkane Studios

Arkane Studios co-creative director **Harvey Smith** has spent the past eight years of his life working on the *Dishonored* series. He takes some time out to reflect on the process of making a remarkable sequel. (Warning: contains spoilers.)

Opening the game in the grey docks of Dunwall was a bold choice, given the new engine's capabilities.
One of the first ideas we had was, 'Wouldn't it be great if you could start in Dunwall, seeing the stuff that you had seen before, then set out for the new world and see this more lush environment, Karnaca, where your father comes from?' And then later come home to find it a bit wrecked. It was very difficult to pull off. We literally have different objects for Dunwall and Karnaca – the chairs and whale-oil tanks are different in the two places. So we doubled the work for ourselves.

Returning to Dunwall Tower and finding it predominantly unchanged is a powerful moment.
Yeah. We did change a few things, but we tried to stick to what could have been remodelled in the intervening years. We thought it would be great if players just remembered their way around. We have players going to the exact point where you turn a lamp on the wall and open the secret door. And so we have players that are moving their way through Dunwall Tower, which is all crumbling and inhabited by witches now, on a lark. It's awesome to get stories like that from people.

There are lots of references to find.
I think it was Dinga Bakaba, our lead designer, who at some point was talking to me and Sachka Duval, our narrative designer, and he said it would be nice if the hallway leading out of the palace also served as a bit of a time capsule. We loved that idea. There's a carving of a boat from Samuel Beechworth in there, and the painting of the Pendleton brothers, and that's the kind of stuff that nobody except the people who played the first game will care about.

Were you concerned that people who hadn't played the first game's DLC would feel lost?
It's really tricky because on one hand we're excited about callbacks, and people thinking to open that secret room and it being there. Or having these weird memories of, 'This is where I had the Lord Regent arrested'. On the other hand you have to make the story accessible to people new to the game. We believe that some of the elements of storytelling are super-important to games, like environmental storytelling where you can infer something from the room. Character and setting are incredibly important, too.



"What we'd rather do is set up something almost universally recognisable, then turn the player loose"



But plot we're not so enamoured with, because really, once a player takes the controls, they might spend 30 minutes on a rooftop looking at a pigeon or throwing wine bottles, trying to hit rocks down in the water below. It doesn't mean we *don't* care about it, but what we'd rather do is set up something almost universally recognisable, then turn the player loose in a detailed world where they're in control. It's a fine balance.

Given that standpoint, do you have any regrets about showing so much of the game ahead of its release?
The team complains about that every now and then – I do too. On the other hand, we have an exciting world and we have a lot to show people, but we have to get their attention first. There are people here who worked on both projects, and they say, 'Gosh, when I think back on *Dishonored 1*, we literally showed every single level'. The press were demanding new content to write about. For *Dishonored 2*, there *were* things that we didn't show. But, yeah, the big-ticket items that were super-exciting, that we really had to kill ourselves to make work, most of those we had talked about, but in every case we left out some details. I'd rather people just go in blind. But it's an interesting phenomenon, isn't it?

The game's levels are remarkably intricate. How did you go about constructing them?
We have an architect sitting next to a level designer, and they become a team. The architect has game experience, but also real-world experience, and the level designers have game experience that's focused on flow and narrative. They're almost Dungeon Mastering their way through a mission. And so the two of them work very closely with the rest of us, and we describe at a high level who's there, what's going on, and then we talk about supporting all the different powers all the way through. It's *incredibly* detailed. It takes years.

How would you respond to the idea that high-chaos playthroughs result in a 'bad' ending?
Pretty commonly we hear people say, "Why do they punish me for playing the way I want?" We're catering to two different fantasies. You can ghost your way through the game, take a guy's lunch and disappear. And the other fantasy is, 'I left that city burning at my back'. But do you really want a game where it doesn't matter? We give you a game, unlike most games, where it's a choice whether you kill or not. Players that ghost really want the game to tell them, 'Wow, you're good – you did it without anybody knowing you were there'. But even on a philosophical level, if you kill a bunch of people – let's say 1,500 by the end of the game – is it really the right call to give you a medal and say, 'Good job'? ■

Watch Dogs 2

Mere minutes into *Watch Dogs 2*, we're flush with cash. As we drive along the Golden Gate Bridge, the car in front of us is highlighted, a tap of L1 draining the driver's bank account. There are plenty of vehicles on this iconic stretch of San Francisco steel, and by the end protagonist Marcus Holloway has got a good few grand in his pocket. That ability won't last long – unlock an early upgrade and instead of hoovering up cash, you can hack a vehicle to make it veer off-course – but the message it sends is clear: you don't need to worry about money in this game. Cash is often the primary motivator in a typical open-world adventure, but *Watch Dogs 2* is anything but typical.

You'll still need dosh, admittedly, in a world whose achingly trendy fashions will see you forking out $500 for a hat, and whose 3D-printed weapons and gadgets are priced into the tens of thousands. But it's never hard to come by. Unlock the skill that automatically highlights NPCs with well-stocked bank accounts and you can pick up thousands by simply driving through downtown on the way to your next objective. High-value pedestrians are marked out by a blue box. Line them up in your sights and you're given details about their job, their income and a snippet of personal information – on their frequent Internet search terms, or something they collect, or a recent life event. And so, knowing you don't *need* to take money from everyone you see, you start making snap judgements, based on your personal politics and the scant details you have on people. An insurance broker with a gun collection? Sorry, old chap, but you're broke now. A systems admin who's just bought a condo? You need the cash more than we do. Morality is nothing new to the open-world genre, but this is no mid-cutscene dialogue prompt. It's baked into the entire world at street level, and does more to let you define Holloway's character than any amount of A/B conversation choices could.

Not that he needs much definition. Full of life, ambition and personality, Holloway and his cohorts in the DEDSEC hacking group are a world apart from the original *Watch Dogs*' dour lead Aidan Pearce. Mileage may vary – one man's exuberant youth is another's punchable meme-spouting millennial – but they're at least entertaining, and in the context of their predecessor, they're a ray of light for a game, and a genre, that should be about having fun above all else.

They've got Pearce licked for tech, too. While the first game's protagonist could do an awful lot with his one-button hacks, Holloway has a much greater array of tools at his disposal. Here, as before, a single tap of the L1 button will perform a quick hack of an object, vehicle or NPC. Hold the button down, however, and up to four options appear, selectable using the face buttons. A car can be made to turn left or right, speed up or brake; an NPC can be distracted with a funny text message, have their bank account drained, or be framed for a crime or snitching on a gang. Holloway can also call on the Jumper, a controllable RC car that can be upgraded with a speaker that distracts enemies with toffo-accented putdowns, or his quadcopter drone. It means, in theory at least, there's a far greater degree of flexibility in your approach to *Watch Dogs 2*'s puzzle-like missions.

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

There's a distinct whiff of a Rockstar production to Watch Dogs 2's San Francisco, with its scale and polish



SKILL SHORTAGE
Watch Dogs 2's upgrade system lies in the Research app on Holloway's phone, where new skills can be bought using Research Points accrued as your follower count passes certain milestones. But once you reach the upper tiers of each upgrade category you'll also need Key Data, a series of pickups hidden in devious corners of the Bay Area. Some require thoughtful platforming; others a *Pipe Mania*-style puzzle to shut down a security system. Others insist on an often punishingly difficult infiltration of a highly fortified outpost – after a few fruitless hours, we accepted that we won't be increasing our IED carry capacity any time soon. Still, we appreciate the attempt to bring the skill tree into the world itself, rather than have it be an arbitrary measure of progress through the game.

But the reality is a game that often feels more prescriptive than its predecessor. While you have plenty of tools at your disposal, and are frequently able to use them to improvise your way to your objective, many missions have been designed with a single solution in mind. One infiltration at the headquarters of a Silicon Valley space company saw us try to run a ground-floor gamut of guards, robot sentries and motion-sensing alarms. A couple of hours later we spotted the hackable crane on the top floor that allowed us to trundle all the way to our objective without facing a single threat. And when it all goes south, you might as well put the pad down and wait to die. Guns are weedy; Holloway, a hacker after all, is squishy; and enemies will call in armoured reinforcements at the slightest provocation.

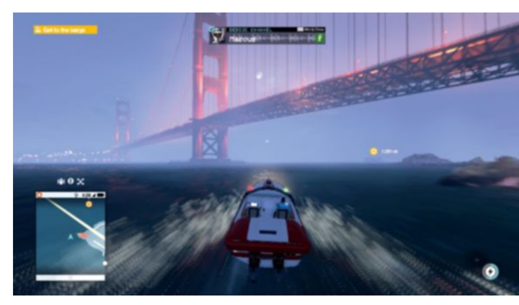
Such moments can frustrate, but only in the context of a game that gives you so much freedom elsewhere – and not just in terms of mechanics, but structure too. Every activity increases DEDSEC's followers, each downloading an app that lends you their device's processing power, building your strength for a final assault against shady data company Blume. So if a story mission's got your goat, you can take a few jobs as a taxi driver. Chats with certain pedestrians yield information leading to new sidequests, all of which bump up your follower count. Or you can simply snap selfies at landmarks, posting them on the Foursquare-alike ScoutX. Open-world games have long struggled to give purpose to your downtime, but here everything you do counts as progress towards your ultimate goal.

Yet the game's greatest achievement is its setting. There's a distinct whiff of a Rockstar production to *Watch Dogs 2*'s San Francisco, with its scale and polish, its savvy skewering of popular culture in general, and Silicon Valley's tech fetish in particular. This, like the real Bay Area, is a world of contradictions, where the super-rich of the tech world rub up against the faded stoners of Haight Ashbury and the impoverished Oakland. Uncommonly for a contemporary Ubisoft game, *Watch Dogs 2*'s San Francisco feels like a place, rather than the backdrop for a sprawling mass of icons; its denizens feel like people, rather than mere quest-givers. And it plays host to a game that addresses the problems of its predecessor, as well as nudging its genre forward – to a place where you play as people you like, where everything you do has value, and where money is the last thing on your mind.

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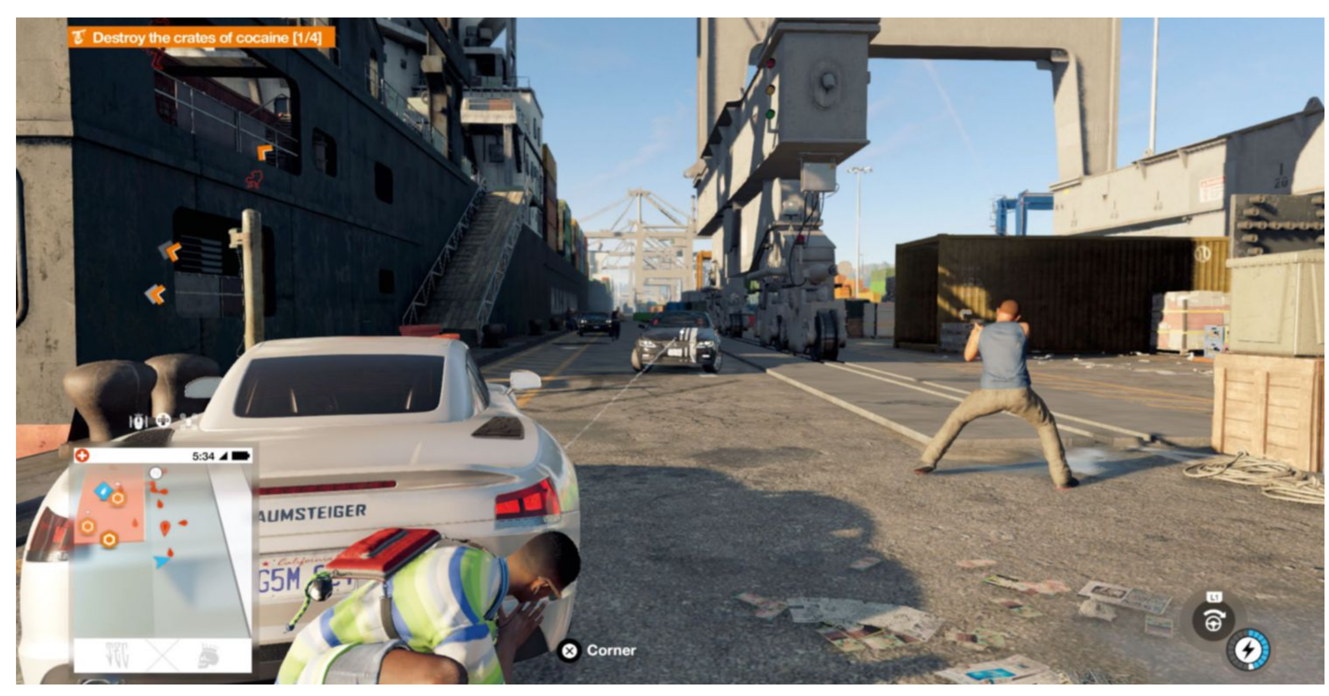


LEFT A brief series of e-kart races form one mission arc – thankfully, it's over quickly enough. Race icons are dotted across the map, though we haven't yet felt the slightest bit inspired to kick one off. **BELOW** While, in the tradition of Ubisoft's open-world games, *Watch Dogs 2* can be a little uneven visually, it's at its best during the day, the California sun buffing up even the blandest scenes

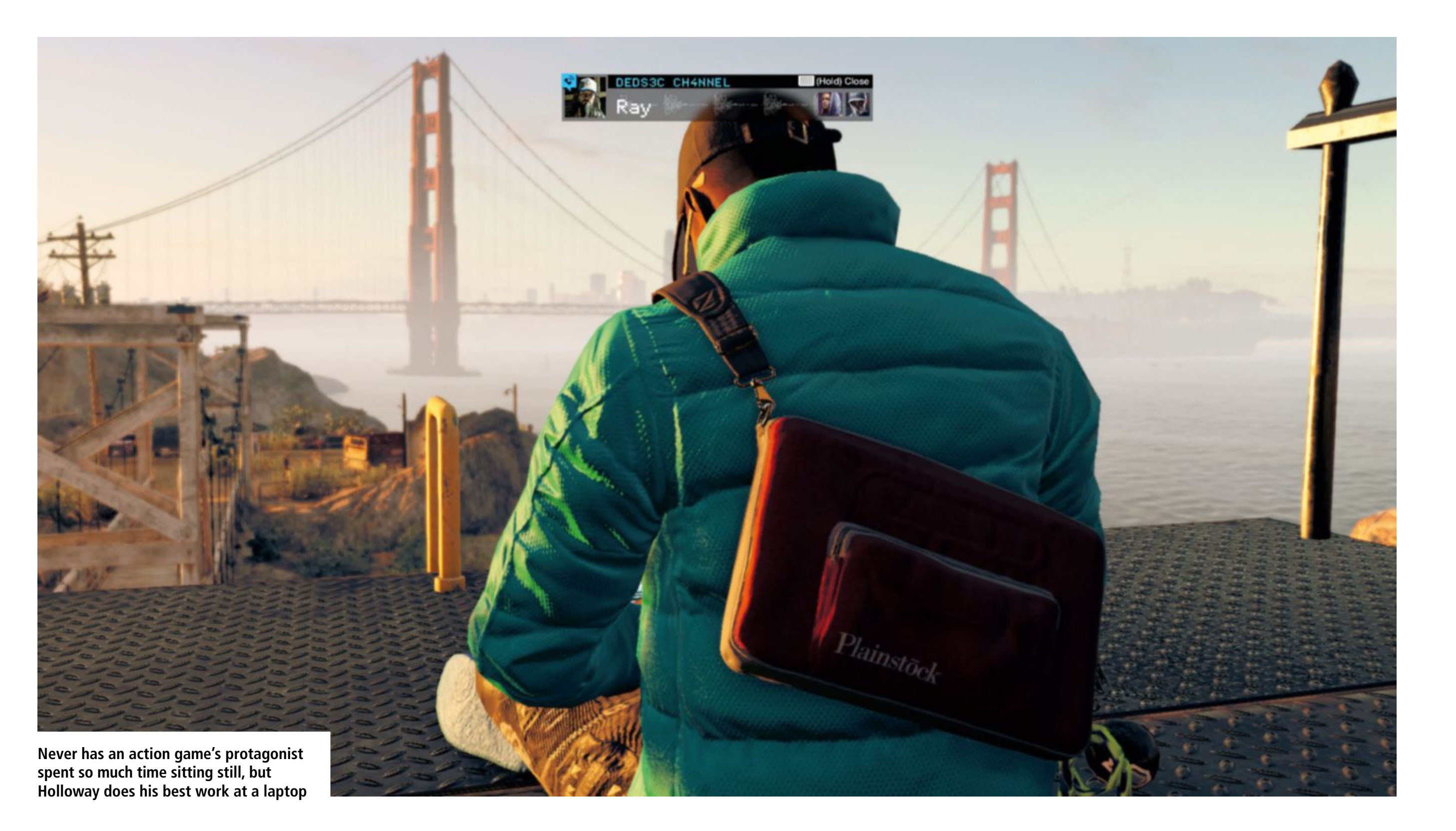


ABOVE While this speedboat was our preferred mode of transport for a sojourn to a tanker out at sea, you can also sail, which requires that you work with the wind and makes for far more engaging races than in karts





Hunkering down somewhere safe just outside an objective and calling in gangs and cop squads to thin out enemy numbers may not be a particularly courageous tactic, but it's an effective one ▶



Never has an action game's protagonist spent so much time sitting still, but Holloway does his best work at a laptop

Post Script

Ubisoft's endless quest to formulate the perfect open world

Ubisoft gets a hard time from players, and sometimes it even deserves it. Often it's a simple matter of quality control: NPCs falling through the floor in *Assassin's Creed Unity*, for instance, or players getting stuck in doors in *The Division*. Yet the most frequent source of flak for Ubisoft is the perception that all of its games are essentially the same. Hundred-million-dollar to-do lists; big, beautiful open worlds splattered liberally with quest icons, each leading to an activity you've done a dozen times before – if not in this Ubisoft game, then another one.

It has made its own bed, in fairness. When you're putting out two or three games every year that are cut from much the same cloth, you can't just rest on your laurels. Even in 2016, the first year in almost a decade to not yield a new *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft has made four open worlds, albeit across a variety of genres. None of *Watch Dogs 2* or its stablemates *Far Cry Primal*, *Tom Clancy's The Division* and *Steep* are perfect, but they are the work of a company that has a vested interest in thinking about how the open-world game might be pushed forward.

And it is clear, looking back, that 2016 was the year Ubisoft decided that every available activity in a teeming open world should be meaningful. In *The Division*, that meant an end-of-mission loot drop and a dollop of XP for your character. But in *Primal* and *Watch Dogs 2* we discover Ubisoft's principal contribution to the genre for the year: tying progress to a follower count. In *Watch Dogs 2* every taxi fare, quadbike race and outer-space satellite hack raises your public profile and gives you more processing power with which to take on the nefarious data company at the centre of the story.

It's an understandable concept from a publisher with a 24/7, global development operation making some of the biggest and most bustling worlds. If you're investing all those resources into making something so complex – the car handling in Newcastle, the water physics in Singapore, a DLC chapter in Serbia – you must do all you can to ensure players see everything. With access to reams of data showing which activities players are drawn to (remember *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s five-star mission-rating system?), Ubisoft has seemingly surmised that more must be done to get players off the beaten track, and decided that the solution is to tangibly reward them for doing so.

Great stuff on paper, but does it work? Our time in *Watch Dogs 2*'s San Francisco has been spent much the same as in any other open-world game. Main story missions keep our focus, and we are drawn off the critical path primarily by our proximity to something we deem interesting – a side-mission we quite fancy, an upgrade we could use, or simply an inviting piece of scenery. Knowing that e-kart racing, for instance, will push our follower count towards the next milestone is no more or less likely to make us want to do it. If anything, it has the opposite effect: rather than being rewarded for doing something, we feel we're being punished for not doing it.

Do we really need a reward to feel rewarded? The appeal of open-world games is as the name implies: you can go anywhere and do whatever you like, and exploration and experimentation should surely be their own rewards. Perhaps, 15 years after *Grand Theft Auto III*, we have grown desensitised to the magic of the open world; maybe publishers, particularly Ubisoft, have milked dry a genre whose potential once seemed boundless, poring over the data to the point that data is all that remains. It has left the most prolific maker of open-world games on the planet working to the thesis that the only thing that gets us all really, truly going these days is the sight of a number going up. *Watch Dogs 2* wants us to question the benefits of technology's relentless march. Ubisoft may be tempted to consider these things, too. ■

Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare

That you will spend much of *Infinite Warfare* thinking of other games says a lot about the current state of *Call Of Duty*. With each passing year, it drifts further away from the game that won hearts, minds and a vast audience almost a decade ago, when it was accessible, flexible, and for everyone who was ever interested in shooting a videogame soldier in the head. As the years roll by, the series heads further from its contemporary setting, and after a couple of years of half-arsing it, here fully embraces sci-fi.

And so 2016's *Call Of Duty* will remind you, with its spacebound dogfights, of *EVE Valkyrie*. On the deck of the Retribution starship, the story's focus on humanity and camaraderie will evoke memories of *Mass Effect*. The painted-looking '70s sci-fi aesthetic of its starscapes recalls *No Man's Sky*. *Infinite Warfare*'s campaign is still a *COD* game, certainly, a five-hour, largely linear romp along the most spectacularly decorated corridor of the year. But as we empty an energy weapon into the umpteenth robot enemy we've smashed to pieces, we don't feel this is the latest game in the series that gave us *COD2*'s Omaha Beach landing or *Modern Warfare*'s All Ghillied Up. Instead it feels like a hugely overfunded sequel to Sega's 2012 B-game *Binary Domain*.

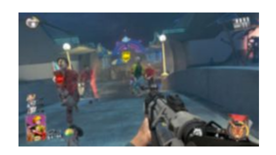
The crucial difference being that Sega's robots were actually fun to fight: limbs would splinter and break off, affecting their movement. Here, they just keep coming. Put them down, presuming them dead, and they'll just get up again. Sometimes, at the brink of death, they'll activate their self-destruct mechanisms and rush you. There's an irritating lack of feedback to things dying, a problem compounded by the aggressive flinch when you take a hit and the accompanying jam-slathered screen that has long been this series' calling card, but feels especially unsuitable in a game set almost exclusively in the dark and that takes place over longer ranges than ever, its scale widened out by the blackness of space.

Thankfully, the arsenal makes up for it, with a broad range of energy and ballistic weapons, many of which have two modes of fire – an assault rifle becoming a shotgun, for instance – and a range of gadgets that go far beyond the usual frags and flashbangs. Anti-gravity grenades fling enemies into the air; a shield that springs out of your forearm lets you close distance on those hard-to-see enemies; a drone zips about gunning down grunts, helpfully marking targets on your HUD. There's even a solution to the robot problem with a remote-hack tool that lets you assume control of one in firstperson, running around and punching things before hitting the self-destruct. While its style and setting are worlds apart from early *COD*s, *Infinite Warfare* is, like its predecessors, ultimately a celebration of toys.

Combat can be irksome, then, but only in the context of a singleplayer campaign that feels like a step forward for its host series in nearly every other respect.

Developer Infinity Ward
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The action is so fast, and the time to kill so low, that anyone outside of the hardcore COD audience is in for a rough ride



DAY OF THE DAFT
Zombies mode is rarely a thematic fit for *Call Of Duty*, but rarely has the disparity been so stark as here. Dropping up to four players in a B-movie shoot at an '80s theme park, casting them as nerd, jock, b-boy or bimbo, Zombies In Spaceland is the most brazenly camp '80s pastiche since *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*. It's always been a silly mode, but revels in it here, from the licensed '80s soundtrack to the daft array of buffs and modifiers you pick up as you progress. When Sunglasses At Night comes on the radio, a pair of shades spawns on the map, your reduced, monochromatic vision a step on the path to acquiring one of the mode's wonder weapons. Charmingly stupid.

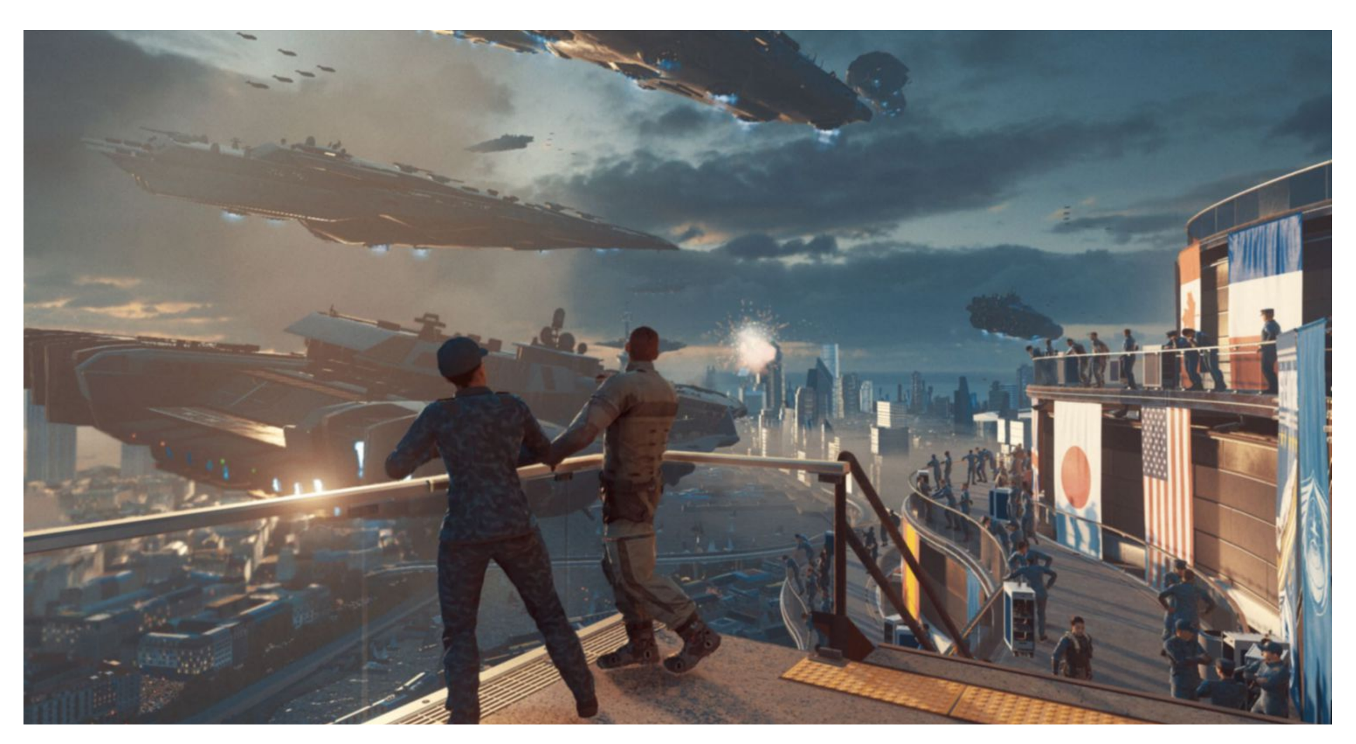
The often breakneck pace of a *COD* game has a little more breathing room here with enforced downtime between missions, as you freely walk the halls of the Retribution, after being made captain of it early on. Relationships develop with – get this – believably written characters. Grunts chat about the previous mission, or veg out in front of TV news reports and bemoan obvious propaganda. It's hardly revolutionary – the story itself is standard good-vs-evil stuff, albeit in space this time – and antagonist Kit Harrington is denied the role (or screen time) to show his best.

And then there is space. Gunfights are strange, feeling as much underwater as they do in planetary orbit, albeit with a grappling hook that lets you flit speedily between pieces of cover. Dogfights, however, are a joy, giving you full control over your ship but having autopilot kick in when you lock onto an enemy, boosting to top speed and banking elegantly to keep the target roughly in your sights. After 12 games of moving largely from cover to cover down elaborate corridors, having such elegantly controlled freedom is like a dream, and Infinity Ward fills all that empty space with, essentially, a load of big things blowing up spectacularly. All told, this is the most refreshing *COD* campaign in years, even if that's damning with faint praise.

Faint praise would be a blessing for the multiplayer mode, however. The secret to *COD*'s world-beating success was that it was a shooter anyone could play, with a gun for every occasion and perks to help atone for a given player's shortcomings. Yet as the years roll by it's now a mode built specifically for a core audience of, we assume, very young men with catlike reactions. There are some well-meaning additions – challenges styled on *Destiny*'s bounties that sweeten the pill of another loss with a dollop of XP, for instance. But the action is so fast, and the time to kill so low, that anyone outside of the hardcore *Call Of Duty* audience is in for a rough ride, especially on maps that seem to have been designed from schematics for roundabouts.

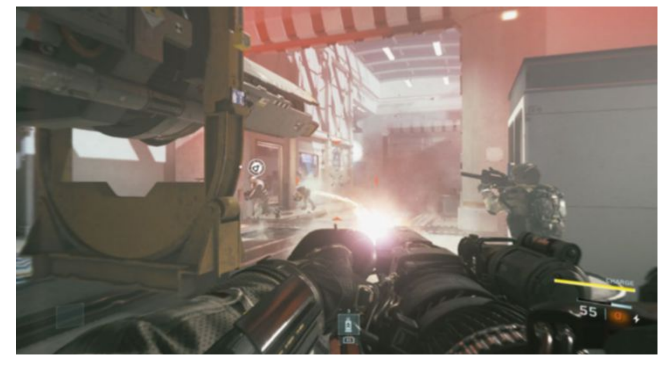
Suffice it to say that it's no longer our thing: the supersoldier fantasy should make you feel powerful, not ancient. Others in the same position may find more to like in Zombies mode (see 'Day of the daft'), which this time decamps – emphasis on 'camp' – to the '80s. Its inclusion in every new *Call Of Duty*, rather than just those made by Treyarch, suggests that Activision understands that competitive multiplayer isn't the universal draw it used to be. The result is a game that seems uncertain of its place in the world: a smart campaign that is at its best when it's not being *Call Of Duty*, a multiplayer mode that seems to get dumber every year, and an undead-infested side-mode that revels in its silliness. No wonder *Infinite Warfare* reminds us of other games: it has too much of an identity crisis to stand on its own.

7





ABOVE The autopilot that kicks in when you lock onto an enemy fighter isn't just welcome, but essential. There's no locking on to larger targets like this; instead you must take out its turrets, then focus fire on a weak point





MAIN Even during downtime, Infinity Ward's old habits die hard. A brief bit of planetside exposition is accompanied, naturally, by a flyby of the entire galactic armada. ABOVE The Steel Dragon, a laser beam that automatically targets multiple enemies, is a delight in singleplayer. It's in multiplayer, too, as the Payload super for the Merc class. Catch enemies unaware and it can prove devastating. LEFT At moments such as this, the benefits of the move to outer space are clear. Since *Modern Warfare*, *Call Of Duty* has always had itchy feet, but globetrotting can only give you so much. This is the most visually varied *COD* campaign there's ever been

Titanfall 2

Developer Respawn Entertainment
Publisher EA
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The first *Titanfall* gave us the Smart Pistol, a gun that automatically locked onto multiple targets before emptying its clip into the lot of them. It was a beautiful piece of design, subverting decades' worth of shooter tropes by making the humble sidearm among the most powerful weapons in the game, and certainly its most satisfying. While it returns in *Titanfall 2*, it's an endgame pursuit, both in single- and multiplayer. By moving it, if not into the background then at least far off in the distance, Respawn is in theory leaving a gaping hole in *Titanfall 2*'s arsenal. Needless to say, it fills it, and with gusto.

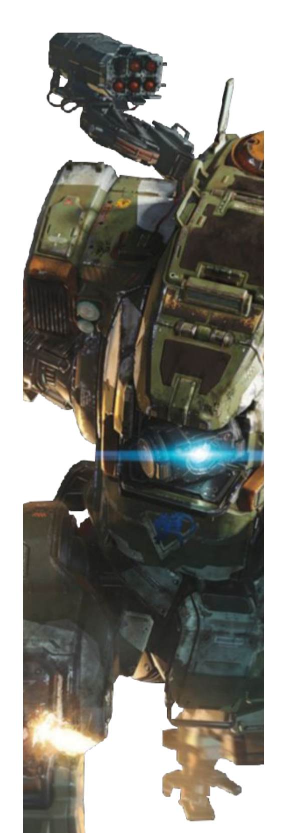
Perhaps the closest in spirit to the Smart Pistol is the Double Take. It's a dual-mode rifle, a shotgun up close and a sniper rifle from range, its variable zoom selectable with a click of the left thumbstick. Shooters aren't supposed to let you do stuff like this; you pick your loadout and take your choice, the sniper knowing they'll be vulnerable to close-range weapons, the shotgunner a weakling from distance. Well, Respawn says, sod that. The *Titanfall* games' greatest trick is they seem so uninterested in being shooters, while at the same time quietly redefining what the word means.

Frequently it feels as if guns are the last thing on Respawn's mind. It's especially true in the campaign, a mode conspicuous by its absence from the first game and, by a stretch, the highlight of the sequel. Rather than look at how its arsenal could be used in creative ways, Respawn looks at everything else *Titanfall 2* can offer both the player and the designer that a traditional shooter – the *Call Of Duty*s that made this team's name in particular – never could. The result is a six-hour procession of slicky polished craft and relentless invention that combine to form one of the most refreshing, forward-thinking FPS campaigns in an age.

The base *Titanfall* Pilot moveset – double jump, wall run, mantle – always felt like a level designer's fantasy. While there were certainly flashes of genius in the elegant wallside paths and rooftop racing lines that corkscrewed around the original game's multiplayer maps, *Titanfall*'s movement always seemed to need a little more room to breathe; for the player to be able to stop, take in their surroundings and think about their approach without being blown up by a 16-ton mech piloted by a hyperactive teenager working on their K/D ratio. Even in singleplayer, *Titanfall 2* is a game best played at searing, hyperkinetic pace – the opening level's time-trial training course makes that abundantly clear, and repeat playthroughs of the campaign will be played with a stopwatch on your coffee table. But it's equally a game of delicate pace, of brains, of puzzles.

New ideas arrive every level, and feel so revelatory that you expect them to become part of an expanding moveset. But they're cast aside as soon as Respawn's designers have had enough to make way for the next.

Ideas strong enough to power entire games are introduced and then tossed away casually



There are bum notes, inevitably – if there should be a *Titanfall 3* we hope that whoever came up with the exploding spider robots is fired, silently and suddenly from behind, while he's in the middle of something important. But on the whole *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is a work of dazzling invention, in which ideas strong enough to power entire games are introduced and then tossed away casually. It's hard to believe it was greenlit by a publisher whose love of the formulaic is legendary. EA just put out the best Nintendo game of the year.

You would forgive Respawn for focusing its efforts on *Titanfall 2*'s singleplayer component, since the first game's multiplayer felt solid enough to need only the most careful of guiding hands. But much has changed, and not always for the better. Titans now have fixed class loadouts, a decision intended to make the fight fairer (the idea being you can tell a Titan's arsenal from its silhouette) that suffers for its lack of flexibility. While map layouts retain the level-design flair of the first game, they feel more like arenas than theatres of war; while Respawn's attempt to add a story campaign to multiplayer combat in the first game was as muddled in execution as it sounded in theory, those narrative elements helped put each map into a plausible military context. You knew what was being fought for, and why.

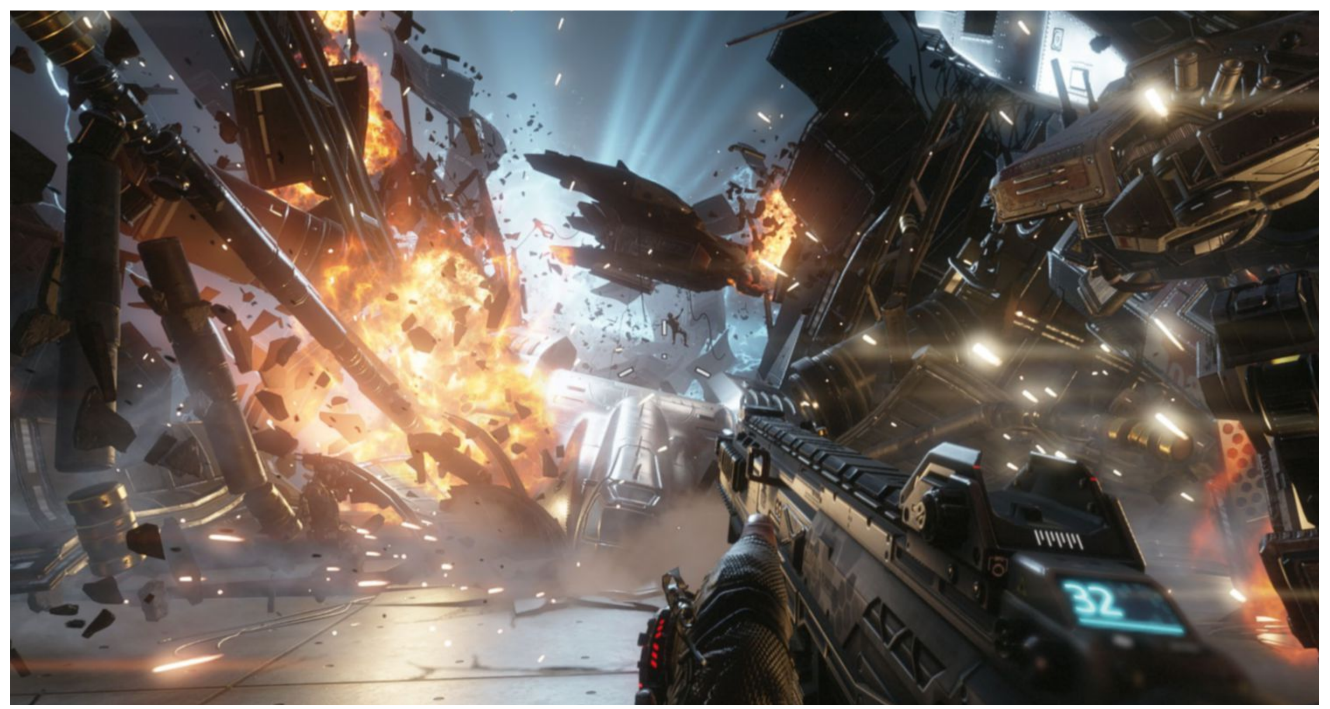
In the absence of that, *Titanfall 2*'s multiplayer feels more like a sport than a war, as if a military delegation landed in a dilapidated city and thought it seemed like a good place for a ruck. Meanwhile, the AI-powered mobs that previously roamed the map now appear from dropships in fixed positions at fixed times, and don't stray far from their spawn. They've always been cannon fodder, but rarely this literally: in flagship mode Bounty Hunt, you kill them to build up a cash score you must bank at stations that only open between waves. Assuming, of course, you don't get shot in the back on the way, losing half your wallet to a cloaked fellow with a shotgun who's spent the past few minutes ignoring the raging battle while hunting for the optimal, most profitable hiding place. It seems rather against the spirit of a game that's at its best when you're moving at pace. You can see us wall-running, but can you shoot us?

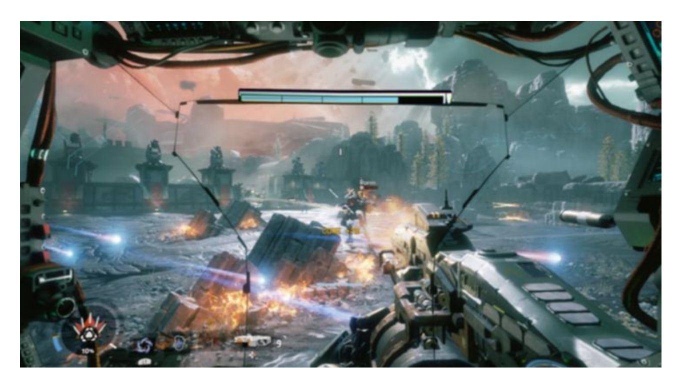
Perhaps we're overthinking it. The core *Titanfall* moveset is a joy, and it has been thoughtfully expanded with a delightful grappling hook. Its big stompy mech suits are, as ever, a punchily destructive, finely balanced thrill, and now there are more of them. And its weaponry, even before you unlock the Smart Pistol, is varied, distinct and thrilling. Respawn is committed to *Titanfall 2*'s future, with a host of maps and modes on the way, all of which will be free. No doubt the multiplayer side of the game will improve over time. If it ends up anywhere near the campaign in terms of quality, it'll be some achievement.

9

RIGHT Is this really running on the same engine that powered *Half-Life 2*? Sort of – Respawn has now modified Valve's Source so heavily that it's unrecognisable. **MAIN** *Quantum Break* built an entire game around the concept of abruptly stopping time, but here Respawn uses the device for just a fleeting section. It's a recurring theme in a game that delights in moving the goalposts. **BOTTOM** Most of the campaign's Titan-on-Titan combat is set in enclosed spaces – a useful primer for the multiplayer mode. This late-game, large-scale fight between two Titan battalions is a delicious break from the norm









ABOVE Your Titan's health is topped up by battery pickups, strewn around the map and dropped by fallen Titans. Online, an infantry friend can climb on the back of an enemy's Titan, pinch their battery, and give it to yours

Hitman

While IO's plan to drip-feed its latest *Hitman* was met with unease initially, the studio's experiment in episodic delivery has proven a good fit for the assassination-focused series. But while the first season boasts some memorable highlights, the six-mission collection is characterised as much by inconsistency as it is murderous creativity.

In Sapienza, the setting for Episode 2, the season's peak came early. That's not to say it has been on an entirely downward trajectory since then, but the expansive Italian town and surrounding Amalfi coast was always going to be hard to top. Its sense of scale, along with some remarkably organic level design, makes it the perfect setting for Agent 47's return to *Hitman: Blood Money*'s values as he oscillates between precision planning and tumbling improvisation in a wide-open, deadly playground. The level somehow manages to blend a beautiful coastal settlement, sizeable mansion and underground lab into one seamlessly flowing space that continues to make sense even as camp sci-fi silliness elbows its way into an authentically sleepy collection of villas and cobbled streets.

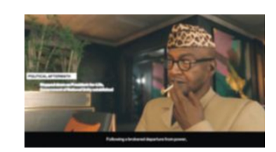
It dwarfs Episode 1's solid Parisian mission to the same extent that that mansion does the tutorial level's mocked-up yacht, and does so without straining or diluting the intricate web of possibilities that characterises 2016's series refresh. It's understandable, then, that IO chose to get Sapienza into the wild early, shoring up the stability of its playerbase by immediately unleashing its most spectacular creation. And while there's an argument to say that holding it back until later in the season would have spared subsequent episodes the indignity of existing in its shadow, its position in the running order has been carefully chosen to reinforce the rising tension of *Hitman*'s storyline as each subsequent level dials up the danger, claustrophobia, and difficulty.

The tipping point for this strategy is Episode 5, in which you infiltrate a militant hacktivist compound in Colorado. There's no grace period in which you can wander around to assess the location, or lock down targets' movements before making your move – here, tellingly, you start the mission crouched behind cover and must figure out how to close the distance between you and your marks in a location that's immediately, and wholly, hostile to your presence. It's a smart reversal of the experience of brazenly walking up to the main entrance of a Parisian fashion show, invite in hand, and serves to showcase the remarkable flexibility of *Hitman*'s stealth mechanics.

But that flexibility is counterpointed by an uncharacteristic gameplay bottleneck that can't be tackled in the free-wheeling, experimental way that most other tasks can. And while Agent 47 still acquits himself well when his options for dressing up are limited to camo fatigues and baseball caps, the reduced opportunities to get into character, combined with the oppressively hostile environment, inevitably result in a mission that feels flat in comparison to the others.

Developer IO Interactive
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

IO has set about delivering six unique sandboxes crammed with possibility, humour and surprises



DIE HARD
If you're reading this, then it's already too late. *Hitman*'s Elusive Targets each existed for a slim period of a few days and afforded players only one 72-hour window of opportunity to make the kill. IO has reaffirmed that they really were a one-shot deal, too, and won't be made available in the forthcoming boxed version of the game, meaning that players who succeeded under those uniquely challenging conditions are now part of a reasonably exclusive club of contract killers. Along with the episodic release structure and escalation missions, they helped to reinforce a sense of urgency and made environments feel even more alive – transient peaks that rallied *Hitman*'s online community and demonstrated IO at its boldest.

Episode 3, set in Marrakesh, suffers similarly, albeit for topographical reasons. Immediately following on from Sapienza's grandiose spectacle does it no favours, but Marrakesh's rigid layout is obstinately compartmentalised, resulting in a collection of districts and building interiors that feel disjointed. It does, however, serve as a high point for the engine's crowd-handling tech, and the busy market stalls and groups of angry protestors are an astonishing sight. Even so, the comparatively heavy-handed partitioning of each area exposes the nuts and bolts of the game's design in a way that simply doesn't happen elsewhere – nothing breaks as a result, and there's still plenty of enjoyment to be mined from the scenario, but it's all a little more clunky.

Such problems are absent in Episode 4 and the finale, however. The former deployment takes place in a luxury hotel, recalling *Blood Money*'s House Of Cards mission, and offers up a particularly odious pair of targets – a spoilt rockstar and his family's manipulative lawyer – one wandering around in plain view for the duration. The latter, meanwhile, checks you into a luxury Japanese hospital with dubious ethical standards and asks you to target a heart-surgery patient and another lawyer. Both missions present a tight warren of public and service areas that demand frequent changes of disguise and an ability to alter tactics quickly as situations shift. And while they're necessarily more compact than Sapienza, both are almost as memorable – even if not quite as convincingly organic.

Ultimately, the quality of *Hitman*'s locations doesn't really matter, such is the potency of the interlocking systems at its centre. IO has set about delivering six unique sandboxes crammed with possibility, humour and surprises, and the sheer imagination with which it has set up some of the scenarios is dazzling. Each episode cheerfully accommodates dozens of attempts without ever feeling repetitive or restrictive – from your first clumsy, brutish foray into the space, to those perfected Silent Assassin runs in which the spectacular showmanship of your targets' demise is only rivalled by your cool-headed efficiency.

But it's the game's flexibility that drives its enduring appeal, complemented by its granular UI and difficulty settings that enable you to make it as easy or as hard as you like – whether through developer-prescribed challenges or personal rules imposed as a matter of pride – without ever adjusting a slider. In Sapienza, IO has created the series' best level, while the complete package represents a powerfully convincing case for the potential of episodic delivery.

9





ABOVE While no one will ever comment on the barcode adorning the back of your shiny bonce, they will remark on the things you do (or bodies you have left behind) in a remarkably responsive – and often amusing – way



TOP Despite the remarkable crowds that pack the streets of Marrakesh, Agent 47 is able to move through these places in a naturalistic way. MAIN Sapienza is a beautiful setting, and dauntingly large. The scale on offer opens up a dizzying number of opportunities and routes to your targets and can feel a little overwhelming on first approach. RIGHT The change of pace in Colorado's stealth-based mission is initially refreshing, but ultimately limits the episode's replayability



Planet Coaster

Developer/publisher Frontier Developments
Format PC
Release Out now

Given *Planet Coaster*'s friendly exterior, it's a little disheartening to begin yet another sprawling simulation from Frontier Developments and be fobbed off with a few short YouTube videos instead of a proper tutorial. The game is riddled with control tooltips, at least, but such is the depth and complexity of *Planet Coaster*'s toolset that it can all feel distinctly overwhelming at first.

With perseverance, and some time spent impatiently watching videos, things begin to fall into place. There are three main ways to play the game: Career, Sandbox and Challenge. The first of these collects a series of disparate scenarios and asks you to achieve certain goals to earn the maximum three-star rating. You might need to reach a certain guest threshold, for example, or achieve a given monthly profit. Each theme – including western, pirate, fairytale and sci-fi – features three missions, and in every setup you'll assume control of a half-finished theme park and attempt to make it as attractive to guests as possible. In one scenario you must fend off impending bankruptcy in a park with no open rides and an unfinished rollercoaster; in another you need to construct a park with firm green credentials and hold back from deforesting the area for profit.

The constructions that serve as your starting point in the career missions provide Frontier's level designers with an opportunity to showcase their well-honed building skills and give the rest of us a dauntingly high bar to aim for. Pirate havens line the shore of a lake occupied by a grand galleon as pathways snake in and out of skull-shaped mountains. A track ride dips underground and snakes its way through a beautifully lit, sculpted cave network inhabited by the flailing tentacles of some underground monstrosity. And in another starter a distinctly Cobra-esque spacecraft lies at the end of an impact trench that's strewn with burning wreckage, while two nearby whirling neon rides spin their passengers high above the crash site.

Sandbox mode gives you control of *Planet Coaster*'s assets, an unlimited budget and no pressures other than your own artistic integrity. But the splendid creations in Career mode make it all the more crushing when, on starting the mode for the first time and crippled by the flat, bare expanse before us, we only manage a wobbly pathway that leads to a toilet block. It's a start, at least, and our convenience immediately proves popular with a family optimistic enough to have paid our $40 park entrance fee. While it's a good place to experiment with techniques and ideas – and is providing the foundation for some incredible player-made builds – the lack of structure, goals or restrictions make it a less appealing place for players hoping to run their own theme park.

Challenge mode caters for that demographic. Here you must build a park from scratch while working within a tight budget and managing the minutiae of your park's day-to-day running. You'll have to consider everything from food and ride pricing to how happy your guests are while queuing. The level of granularity is remarkable: it's not just the length of the line that factors into a ride's appeal, but whether the queue is long and straight or snaking, how much scenery there is around it, the amount of litter on the floor, and even the position of the ride relative to the rest of the park.

There are graphs and numbers to pore over, but the easiest way to judge is simply to watch guests' behaviour. Every customer is lovingly animated and overly expressive, making it easy to read their mood even when zoomed out (a view you'll use extensively given the cacophony the individually soundtracked rides create when close up – better to hover up high and enjoy Jim Guthrie's wonderfully melancholic compositions). If a ride's queue is busy, you can up the entrance cost. Similarly, if people are gravitating to one side of the park, then you know it's worth building a monorail or pathway to make getting around easier.

The path-laying system is flexible and intuitive (even if the fiddly camera occasionally works against it), but is tuned more for sweeping curves than it is grids. You'll need to add queue and exit pathways for every ride, too, which can be an awkward business, especially if you've initially misjudged a ride's positioning.

There are dozens of prefabricated rides to place, including a selection of rollercoasters, but you're also at liberty to create your own vomit-inducing death traps. You can sculpt ad-hoc or pick from a selection of more complex Frontier-created pieces that loop, corkscrew and switch back. Once complete, new rides need to be tested using crash dummies, and this run then provides all manner of stats and heat maps on how exciting, scary or nauseating your creation is. Low nausea, medium fear and high excitement is the ideal, but our first attempt was shunned outright by thousands of attendees. Tweaking your ride according to the test results and retesting as you close in on a world-class ride is, however, a simple and enjoyable process.

Planet Coaster's customisation and landscaping tools offer unprecedented control over the look and design of your parks, but the management components behind the scenes feel oddly muted. Loans and marketing campaign options are overly simplified, and fiddling with the staff roster can often border on being tedious. The game is also rather easy, and full-on bankruptcy doesn't seem to be a real threat. The simplified behind-the-scenes automation serves as a kind of autopilot that lets you flirt with whichever aspects you want while not having to worry about anything you don't, but this focus on creativity over flowcharts perfectly suits the most charismatic, expressive construction and management sim yet.

8

There are dozens of prefabricated rides, but you're also at liberty to create your own vomit-inducing death traps



PARKS AND RE-CREATION
While there are fewer prefabricated rides in *Planet Coaster* than there were in *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3* (even prior to that game's DLC additions), there's a handy alternative in the form of Steam Workshop-distributed blueprints. You can copy other players' creations – whether it's rides, scenery or even just modified shops – and use them in your own park. But *Planet Coaster*'s tools also make it remarkably easy to combine existing elements into your own bespoke creations, allowing you to twist, invert and intersect items to whip up anything from new rock formations to more intricately detailed fittings for whichever new theme you dream up.



LEFT *Planet Coaster*'s landscaping tools allow for some truly organic, undulating terrain, as well as outlandish caves and tunnels.
BELOW Parks come to life at night thanks to some excellent lighting. There are all manner of effects that can be added, too, including sparks, fireworks and even cannonballs.
MAIN You can switch to the perspective of any visitor in your park and observe how they move around. Entertainers will boost the happiness of your guests



ABOVE Shop staff are just as expressive as park guests, and their gestures provide a quick way to gauge job satisfaction. If they're moping about and barely acknowledging customers, you may want to up their salary





Lethal VR

After all the clutter of *Dangerous Golf*, Three Fields Entertainment's charming, though flawed, debut, *Lethal VR* is a work of arch minimalism. Loading into a VR training room, you're given your weapon, told the rules of engagement, then set to work on a range of static or moving targets. It's something of a no-brainer for Vive, really – a 360-degree shooting range is an ideal fit for roomscale VR, those tracked controllers a fine facsimile of the guns in your hand. But despite being quite an obvious sort of game, it's an engaging and satisfying use of HTC's technology.

It works most of the time, too, the austere purity of the base concept giving Three Fields' designers the headroom to craft some thoroughly smart stages. Walls appear and hem you in, forcing you to move and lean to angle shots through windows at moving targets. A Wild West town has you headshotting hostage-takers through saloon doorways. Some stages demand that you start with your gun lowered; others that you use a specific weapon to dispatch a certain type of target.

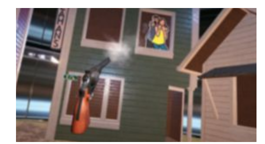
Ah, yes, the weapons. You'll start with a pistol, then two of them, and quickly work through the classics. An SMG; a revolver; a machine pistol. Levels are designed around whichever tool is at your disposal, with SMG stages clustering a number of targets together, revolver levels slower paced to allow time for regular reloads. Before long you mix and match, an SMG in one hand and a pistol in the other, your hands crossing over each other as you live out a two-minute action-hero fantasy.

But not everything in *Lethal VR* is so effective. While the Vive controller is an excellent gun, it's an abysmal throwing arm, and while there's some slapstick pleasure to be had early on as you send a dozen throwing knives spiralling into the ether before finally landing one on the bullseye, things change as the challenge ramps up, especially when hitting the wrong type of target instantly fails the level. Vive's greatest asset is its positional tracking. That a game should introduce luck to the equation is only ever going to frustrate.

Happily, such moments are the exception – and even thrown weaponry has its moments, such as the bonus stage that asks you to use a razor-tipped bowler hat to knock the heads from Renaissance-era statues. The structure, split across short, quickfire levels, means that the irksome ones can be avoided once completed, allowing you to focus on the more pleasurable stages, working on perfect ratings and improving high scores. There's nothing revolutionary in *Lethal VR*, but it's an accessible, frequently enjoyable showcase of what its host hardware is best at, let down only by the decision to bring a knife to a gunfight.


6

Developer/publisher Three Fields Entertainment
Format Vive
Release Out now



LAST ACTION HEROES
Our visit to Three Fields for E290 told us that there is only one thing the staff there love more than '80s pop culture, and that is a good pun. *Lethal VR* combines the two with its stage names. Magnum Force puts a new weapon, Harry's Gun, in your hand; Hard Boiled gives you dual-wielded pistols for the maximum Chow Yun-Fat effect. Clear all the stages and you're given Robocop's machine pistol, downing hostage-taking targets in a level called, obviously, The Future Of Law Enforcement.

This early level shows, in rather basic terms, the sort of quick decisions you'll have to get used to making in *Lethal VR*. The red-coloured targets are friendlies, and shooting them means game over immediately



Robinson: The Journey

Developer/publisher Crytek
Format PSVR
Release Out now

Robinson: *The Journey* is uncharacteristically warm for a Crytek game. That's not a reference to the tropical climate of Tyson III, the alien planet on which the game is set, but rather the big-hearted interplay of the three central characters: protagonist Robin, a boy stranded and orphaned after the starship he was travelling on crashed; his adopted pet baby tyrannosaur, Laika; and HIGS, a fussy, paternal AI drone.

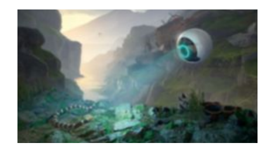
There's a sweet story underpinning this short VR adventure, bolstered by some splendid set dressing. The escape pod that's at the heart of Robin's camp, for example, perfectly treads the already-thin line between crash site and teenager's bedroom. You can play hide-and-seek with Laika, too, and she's a charming component of a number of puzzles, eagerly fetching items or roaring at other dinosaurs to get them to move.

This cosily familial interspecies setup is counterpointed by the gobsmacking grandeur of *Robinson*'s environment. Boiling, sticky tarpits bubble in the shadow of towering alien flora and Tyson III's lumbering apatosaurus equivalents. Lush forests stretch to the horizon, broken by towering cliffs, waterfalls and the glinting wreckage of the Esmeralda, your erstwhile interstellar home. And one memorable section near the end hammers home the scale of your surroundings as you traverse a particularly precarious location. There's a great deal of clambering to be done, in fact, as Robinson borrows *The Climb*'s rock-climbing mechanic. It's significantly stripped-down here, but it's no less enjoyable as a result, and helps to reinforce your vulnerability as you scale rock faces and ancient trees.

On occasion you'll need to solve circuit-based puzzles to get equipment working again. These are tackled by switching to HIGS' viewpoint, from which you can see the whole level spread out below you. They shouldn't pose much of a challenge to most players, but provide an enjoyable change of pace nevertheless. Later in the game there are some stealth sections which, while heavily prescribed, terrify despite their simplicity.

However, although moving around Tyson III is a wonderful distraction in itself, the puzzles aren't always as clearly presented as they might be, a problem that resulted in a particularly frustrating death during our playthrough. It's a short game, too – we reached the end after four hours of unhurried progress. But *Robinson*'s focus is on exploration and discovery, and Crytek provides plenty of distractions for the particularly curious. There's also a reason to keep exploring after the credits roll, and that you'll want to spend more time in this intoxicating world is a robust endorsement of what is a bold, if patchy, expedition into VR.

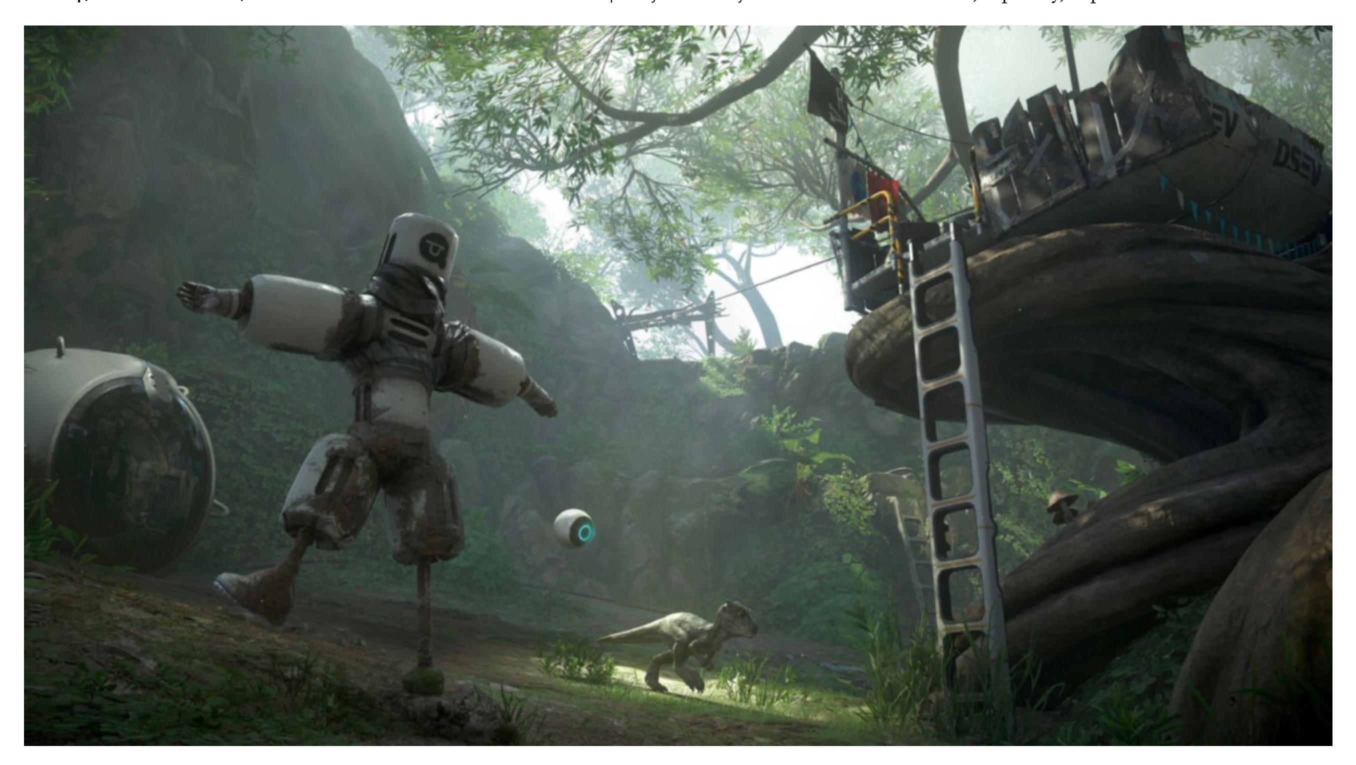
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DINO DOTS

Robin carries a multitool about with him that strongly resembles a Move controller (though, curiously, no Move support is included). Holding down the scan button reveals a matrix of red and green dots within your subject, and you must collect the latter while avoiding the former. Hitting a red dot will reset the scan, and while it sounds simple, these dinosaurs and other creatures are terrible fidgets, making it a real challenge to complete your bestiary.

The attention to detail in *Robinson*'s environment is charming, and Robin's young age is reflected in the boyish constructions he has erected within the camp, such as this treehouse, which HIGS isn't allowed to enter

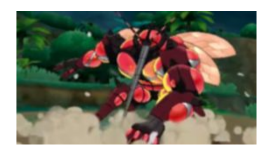


Pokémon Sun and Moon

Hang on, this isn't Pikachu. As the camera plunges into the long grass, the blades part to reveal a familiar yellow face. But its mouth is wonky and its eyes are the slapdash scribbles of a toddler. This, it turns out, is Mimikyu – a lonely Pokémon so desperate for human companionship that it has taken to hiding its true form by cosplaying as its vastly more popular counterpart. It's a moment of self-awareness that nods to the phenomenal success of the original games, but it's also indicative of broader change. This is *Pokémon*, but not quite as you remember it, with everything shifted a few degrees away from normal.

In presentational terms, the series has been playing catch-up for a while. No longer. If *Pokémon X* and *Y* was a compromise, with one foot in the series' digital past, *Sun* and *Moon* have shaken off almost all residual rigidity. You mightn't have manual camera control, but it's never really needed, and while the hardware's 3D functionality is ignored, Game Freak can indulge in more elaborate battle animations without worrying about the framerate tanking. And the new Z-moves – powerful special attacks powered by collectable crystals that can be used once per battle – have a visual dynamism that is pure anime.

Developer Game Freak
Publisher The Pokémon Company
Format 3DS
Release Out now



ULTRAMON
Mega Pokémon? Old news. *Sun* and *Moon* have Ultra Beasts, powerful otherworldly creatures that can only be captured in special Pokéballs. They're central to the game's eccentric plot, which involves a suspiciously virtuous foundation set up to protect endangered species, and factor heavily in the postgame. The most absorbing of the remaining side activities has you visiting spots to snap Pokémon in their natural habitat: your shots are subsequently rated on an in-game social media site, with positive comments adding up to camera upgrades.

The series seems energised by its new setting, the Hawaiian-inspired Alola, such that it's confident to play fast and loose with tradition. Startlingly, there are no gym battles. Instead, you'll face trials against powerful Totem monsters before tackling each island's Kahuna. HM moves, too, are gone, which means you no longer need to burden one team member with Rock Smash or Strength. D-pad shortcuts let you call upon a variety of rideable Pokémon – a Stoutland to dowse for hidden items, for example, or a Charizard who'll fly you to places you've already visited. Captured Pokémon, meanwhile, can now be added to your team immediately, with the monster they're replacing spirited away.

At times, you'll worry Game Freak has thrown the Bayleef out with the Magmortar: some will feel the absence of the gyms' environmental puzzles, while revealing the effectiveness of moves against Pokémon you've already fought diminishes the satisfaction of memorising the type charts. But otherwise your journey through Alola is a delight. The region boasts some of the series' most inspired designs, which are enlivened by some brilliant flavour text that fully embraces the underlying darkness of the Pokémon ecosystem. And in encouraging the player to respect new customs and cultures and to embrace the joy of communicating with others, it promotes a message of kindness and understanding that's never felt more vital.





Pokémon **still doesn't quite cater well enough to players who'd like to unravel the nuances of the battle system without plunging headlong into the arcane depths of the competitive metagame**

Owlboy

Developer/publisher D-Pad Studio
Format PC
Release Out now

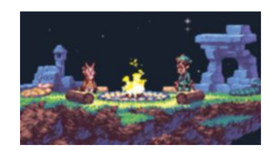
Otus is not exactly your regular videogame hero. He's mute for a start, and as such unable to give back the verbal pastings he gets from his mentor. And he gets a lot of those since, for an owl, he's not too great at flying. He's pretty terrible in a fight too, with a spin attack that sees him get hit more often than not, and a dodge roll that's in dire need of some invincibility frames. So Otus is probably not the first owl you'd go to in the event of, say, a band of pirates turning up and trying to destroy all of owldom after hunting down a series of ancient, all-powerful relics. And yet here we are, weaving in and out of a volley of homing missiles, trying to get behind a pirate craft so that it's struck by its own ordnance.

Luckily, there are other things Otus is pretty good at. Carrying stuff, for instance. He's good at making friends, too, despite his inability to speak. Before long, he finds himself combining the two: making pals, then picking them up. His first recruit is Geddy, a sweet if rather hapless soldier who fires his blaster at enemies from the comfort of Otus' talons in one of eight D-pad directions. Later he'll be joined by Alphonse, a deserter pirate whose shotgun blast is an essential tool for dealing with large groups of enemies, and Twig, who can fire off webs to freeze foes in place. All have their roles to play outside of combat too, in a smartly gear-gated world – destroying different barriers, perhaps, or using a grapple hook to reach distant platforms.

Owlboy has been in development for the best part of a decade, something most evident in the way in which its world has been painstakingly pieced together. While notionally a Metroidvania, only rarely must you remember some long-passed corner of a level that a new power can take you through. Instead you're propelled by smart level design toward the next combat encounter, puzzle chamber or set-piece. A surprising highlight are gentle stealth sections, which place scenery on parallax layers, allowing you to hide from pirates behind boxes.

Yet other elements belie *Owlboy*'s troubled, protracted development. Otus' movement is stiff and ungainly, and at times you feel like you're wrestling with the controls a little too often, particularly when it comes to dropping one object and picking up another, or switching between allies in the thick of battle. Checkpointing can be miserly, too. But you'll persist, just as Otus does; if he's not prepared to let his shortcomings stop him from saving his fellow owls, then neither are you. With a smart, wry script, a warmly uplifting narrative and a likeable cast, this is a game with its heart in the right place, even if some of its other parts feel a little out of whack.

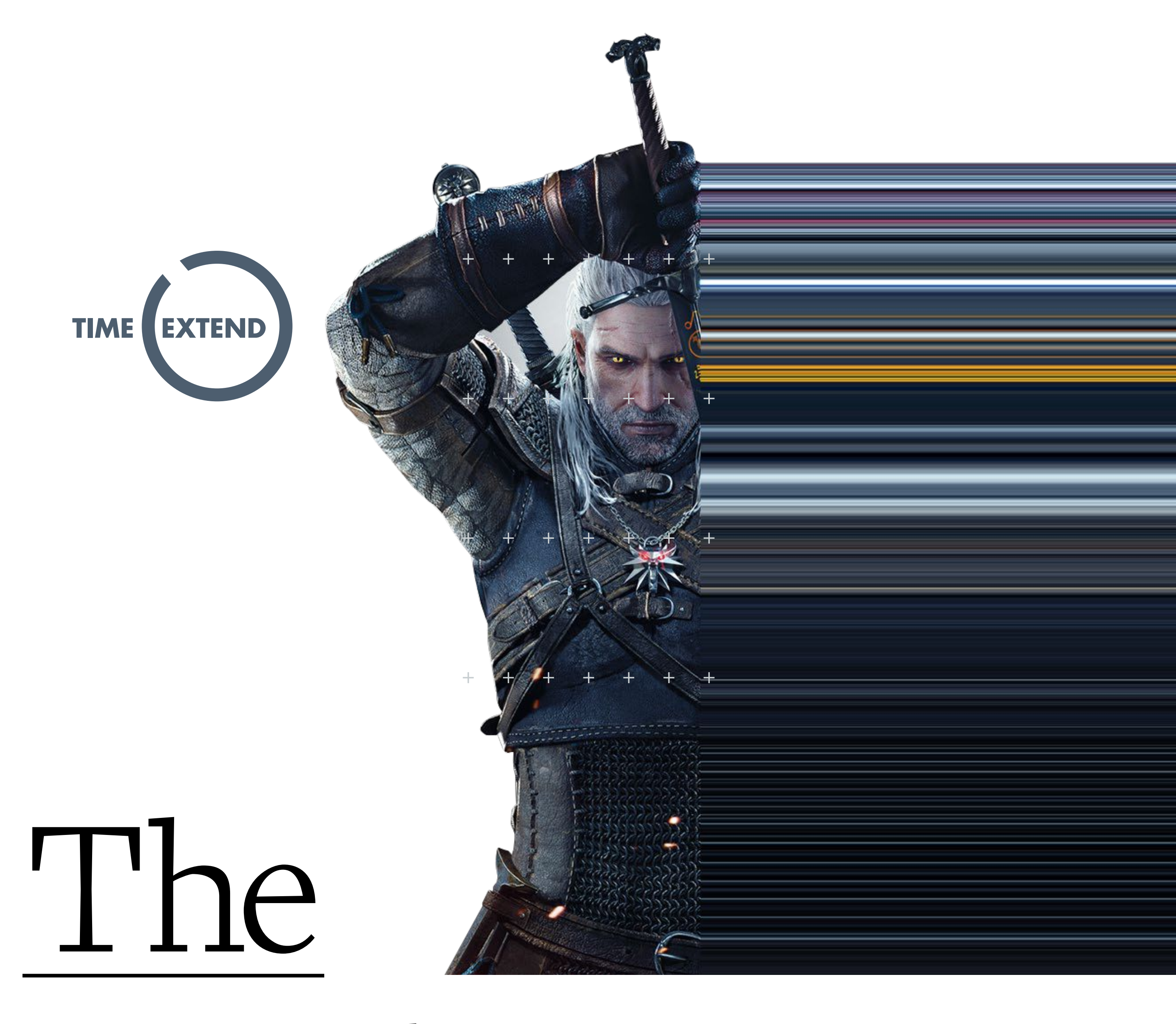




OWLER HAT
Each of *Owlboy*'s areas are dotted with a fixed number of coins. Some are half-buried in chests, which Otus must yank out of the ground; others are rewards for flying through large mid-air rings. All are exchanged at Buccaneer's shop for health boosts, bombs, and a chuckle at the proprietor's fine line in abusing the hired help. One item, the Dorky Hat, falls off when you take a hit, prompting rumours that completing the game while wearing it may yield something special.



These winged fellows are the first enemy you're introduced to. While they're easily dealt with early on, later they attack in large swarms and gain armour that only Otus' spin attack, or Alphonse's shotgun, can break



The Witcher III

If roleplaying games are only as good as their roles, here's one of the greats

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer CD Projekt Red **Publisher** CD Projekt **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

Geralt Of Rivera, the White Wolf and Butcher Of Blaviken, comes with a long history. At the outset of *The Witcher III*, he's somewhere around 100 years old, his life extended by the physical mutations that marked his becoming a witcher, member of an elite cadre of monster hunters. Also behind him are the thousands of words written by his creator, author Andrzej Sapkowski, as well as the hundreds of hours of play in the two games that came before.

For all that it curtails the RPG ideal of building a character and setting forth with it into a world, it's refreshing to play someone as specific as Geralt. Out there, across the battlefields, islands, cities, bogs, peaks and beaches of the Northern Kingdoms, are people to meet and events to uncover that are written just for him. There are many choices ahead, but they're all underscored by being about what Geralt would do, and what the world will do for Geralt.

"Ah, here crawls a witcher!" cries a proselytising priest of the Eternal Fire as you run past. "Look! The corpse-like visage! The beastly eyes! This is magic that's made a mongrel of a man." If you choose to face this magic-hating cleric, Geralt has only one thing to say: "Got the courage to repeat that slander to my face?" But the priest is unrepentant. "Readily! You are a mutant. A freak. A useless relic of a bygone age that should've been burned like a withered branch." While our hackles rise, Geralt says cool; from here you can show the crowd the emptiness of the priest's claim, since he's never saved anyone from the monsters of the world. As you turn away, it turns on him, and you feel justice has been served.

All of Geralt's dialogue, including the choices the game offers you, are very much his, born of a man of weary principles; a man who has seen it all and knows he'll see it all again. With a quest of his own to think of – finding his adopted daughter, Ciri – Geralt doesn't want to get embroiled, but his frequent need for the rewards usually means he has to. Geralt works so well as a protagonist because his motives and outlook mirror those of yours: a player of many games, who has encountered innumerable NPCs in need across many different journeys, and requires gold for a new sword. Geralt often expresses what you're thinking, reacting as you do to the scumbags and horrors you meet.

"Took me a long time to find you," he says to Whoreson Junior, a crime boss who tortures and murders women and gives you the runaround until you find him. "Wasn't an easy road to travel. I'm angry and tired. Had to kill a lot of people along the way. Some of them tried to cheat me, some tried to lie. I didn't like it one bit. I feel like one more lie would be the last bitter drop in a chalice full of sorrow. And then... Then I'd do something I'd later regret."

Or maybe you won't regret killing him. Geralt's honour is flexible enough to sway both ways, and the option's accordingly yours when it comes to it, because while you play closely to Geralt's character and story, you still get to make sweeping choices that have far-reaching effects. Kill Whoreson Junior and a quest is successfully ended and vengeance is done. Spare him, and his many crimes and broken deals will catch up with him. You'll later encounter him begging and weeping in the street.

As scenarios in *The Witcher III* go, this is a simple one. Characters are rarely as despicable as Whoreson. The world is one of deep ambiguity, where doing the right thing is almost impossible, and here, in the Northern Kingdoms, where two great armies face each other across no man's land, that's particularly true. The celebrated Bloody Baron questline exemplifies it, examining closely wife-abusing brute Phillip Strenger.

This self-styled baron was a common soldier, risen to baronhood through conflict. He's switched allegiances from one side, the native Temerians, who are ruled by Radovid, a mad king who has called genocide on all magic users, to the invading Nilfgaardians, led with pitiless aggression by Emperor Emhyr. Now his people are looting and raping their way through lands he's lucked into ruling from his castle, Crow's Perch. His clothes betray his background, a haphazard mixture of well-worn soldier's armour and stately robes.

But he's not a happy man; his wife hates him for his thuggish ways, and through a ▶

long sequence of quests for him we steadily learn of how he'd drunkenly beat her, of a miscarriage, of her flight from him, of a curse, and the baron's profound guilt and sense of loss. The tale is tragic, and as it unravels the baron becomes more sympathetic. The story doesn't shy from his crimes, but expresses the pain and enduring fallout he experiences as a weak man in a situation that's beyond him.

It's a model of *The Witcher III*'s close eye on humanity. Like most videogames, it happily fixates on violence and fantasy, but they're both founded upon their effects on people's lives. We don't see grand battles, but we walk through fields of the dead, broken villages and refugee camps, and we meet those who've lost their loved ones in them. There are ancient wrongs, too, curses and hauntings that Geralt will uncover with compassion, investigating and dispelling the murderous ghost of a murdered bride in order to lay her to rest. This is a world where misery is common but evil is rare. Even higher vampires, predatory and disdainful of human life though they are, are presented as rounded characters, and often sympathetic in *The Witcher III*'s final expansion, *Blood And Wine*.

This is a game that invites understanding, and often forgiveness, in a messy world that's not unlike our own. And so when Geralt meets a being who isn't flawed and weak, it's a shock. Gaunter O'Dimm, Master Of Mirrors, is present right at the very start, in the pub in White Orchard, a moment of foreshadowing whose specifics aren't clear until the arrival of the game's first expansion, *Hearts Of Stone*. He's the devil, malevolent and omnipotent, delighting in subjecting the desperate to curses that prolong their pain. Geralt cannot beat him through brawn, but he can through brains, and though the denouement is fundamentally a scripted puzzle level, it feels like a battle of wills between something otherworldly and Geralt's earthliness.

This isn't a game where you play the min-maxing, amoral kleptomaniac that you might in an *Elder Scrolls* or *Fallout*. In those games, the world is your playground, a place where you can exploit different systems for profit and power, bunnyhopping to raise your Acrobatics skill and placing baskets over shopkeepers' heads so they won't see you steal their wares. In Geralt's world, storylines are set, and cash and levelling are tightly controlled. Most shopkeepers hold little ready cash with which to trade, and it's often difficult to discern the effect of levelling up on your combat prowess.

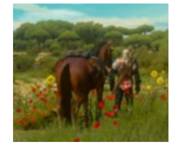
Geralt, after all, is a supernaturally skilled warrior, able to face lechens, katakans and fiends. He's not the Chosen One, nor blessed by fate. He's trained for years to become who he is, and to play him well means learning to be skilled, too. *The Witcher III*'s combat can feel initially dislocated in its attempt to blend stat-based

THIS GAME INVITES UNDERSTANDING, AND OFTEN FORGIVENESS, IN A MESSY WORLD THAT'S NOT UNLIKE OUR OWN

Geralt is voiced in English by Doug Cockle, a gravelly performance that initially comes across as flat but expresses his understated emotions with subtlety

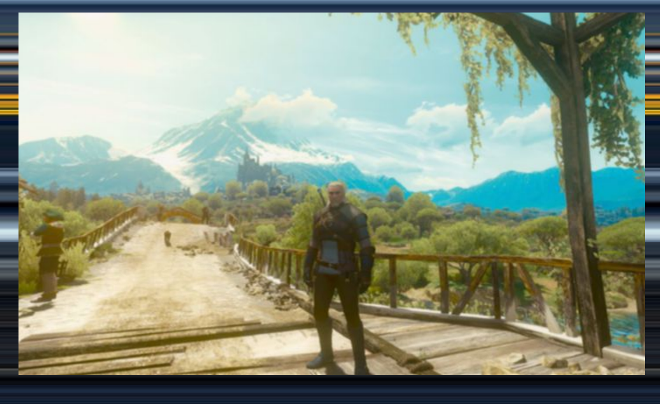


For all Geralt's jaded emotional suppression, he's still capable of fun and vulnerability, which only makes him more likeable



FOLK TALES

The stories you uncover during *The Witcher III*'s quests can often feel timeless, a quality that comes with their fairytale-like nature. It feels like there's a moral living at the heart of every one. There's the woman who covets her sister's lycanthrope husband, only to accidentally subject her to death at his hands. There's a haunted castle where rats have devoured the court of a lord who lived in plenty while the villagers outside faced famine and plague. There's the man who's been left bound by the refugees he was travelling with and is about to be attacked by drowners; save him and he seeks out and murders the refugees in revenge, taking their money in order to reward you for your deed. Decidedly colourful, they each explore repercussions to human foibles.



Of all videogame worlds, *The Witcher III*'s is uncommonly analogue. Geralt takes a natural place in its meandering lanes, chequered fields and tangled forests

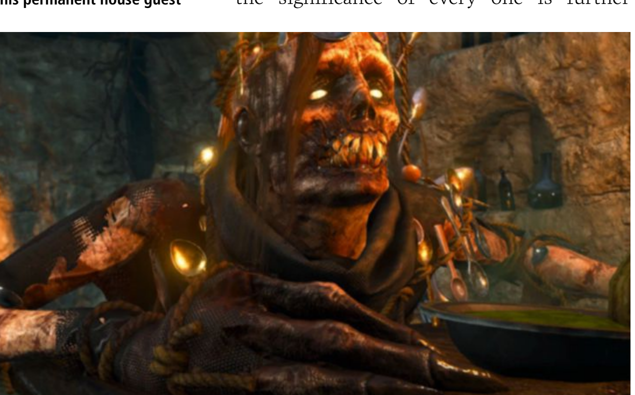
damage with action-based timing, but it's really about planning and anticipation: of a dodge and then a strike and then a roll clear. Geralt finds advantage through experience, patience and deliberate action, and hitting buttons wildly will leave him open to easy defeat on higher difficulty levels.

Geralt's blades are only half his arsenal. His knowledge and use of signs, oils, potions, decoctions and bombs come into their own in challenging fights. Signs are powerful recharging spells, which can be cast to summon a shield or a blast of fire. Oils applied to Geralt's blade will make them more effective against certain enemies. Toxic potions and decoctions lend Geralt special abilities, and bombs can damage groups or prevent magic from being used against him. Every one has specific use, whether by species or by tactics, and the significance of every one is further defined by skills bought as he levels up, enabling specialised builds that increase Sign recharge rates and effectiveness, or critical hits and bleeding from sword strikes, or his ability to withstand the toxicity of his potions so he can take more of them.

To play Geralt well, therefore, is to employ his knowledge, a subtle act that has you roleplaying this preset character without realising it. The closeness you end up feeling to this gruff, tired man lends the main game's ending lasting poignancy. With his main quest to find Ciri successful, the game spends a great deal of time tenderly exploring his relationship with his daughter before they prepare to face the Wild Hunt. They're finally together, and yet we see how Geralt's world is crumbling, his order of witchers nearly extinct and Ciri fated to live apart from him. At the game's conclusion, all he can do is to return to the road to live once again from hand to mouth, from bounty to monster and back again.

This sad state only makes one of the very different endings of *Blood And Wine* more cathartic. Given a house of his own far from the war, and having amassed funds to make it good, Geralt has a visit from Ciri. They discuss the life of a witcher and the idea of settling down. Here, with them sitting on a sunny hill, we don't know whether he really will. But the sense that Geralt's story can finally end is uncommonly satisfying, born of having lived with him for so long. ■

Not every monster is worthy of death. If Geralt can break this wight's curse, it turns into a woman who becomes his permanent house guest







JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

I've been deep in the world of *Battlefield 1*, and I've never been muddier, more tense or more shot at. The word 'immersive' is used too much, but this game does really put you into the First World War and shake you until you rattle. I was sitting in front of it, haunted at the carnage I was causing, when I received an annoyed message from another player. It read: "Tell your mother and your sister to get out of my house". Instantly the spell was broken, and I had to laugh.

The ability to send and receive messages to and from other people while you're playing is commonplace, of course, but for me it's an instant way of dropping back into uncomfortable real life. Most of them tend to be from clearly enraged nine-year-olds who take the idea of being killed and having to respawn far too seriously. More often than not I get a plaintive "Why???" I used to reply that I was playing a game and that's why, but now I just leave all these things unanswered and, if possible, unread.

And actually talking to other players with a microphone takes any gaming experience to a different place entirely. These are real people undergoing a usually intense experience in which they've invested heavily. And because, frankly, most players in most games are better than me, I'm usually the target of their ire, especially when playing cooperatively. Don't, I tell them, expect me to grab the loot or drive the tank or, really, to do anything upon which others depend. I die or fail so often when I'm playing that I've been accused of trolling in the past.

No, the way to do it is to only talk to people you know while you play. And the way to do that is set up a group Skype call on a laptop next to your console. I should probably say that other VOIP packages are available. But doing this is the way forward. You're not hampered by unpleasant plasticky hardware, and you're just chatting specifically to those people you'd actually want to spend time with. It's how all cooperative gaming experiences should be approached.



I've had people – vital people with crucial roles to play – just leave the keyboard to go and watch TV or eat fish fingers

The trouble with random people on the Internet is that cooperative play isn't cooperative at all. Everybody is out for themselves and it just so happens that it might benefit others in the same team. I think it boils down to demographics. Kids are not usually team players, and give them the anonymity of being online halfway across the world and all they'll do is get what they want, regardless of others. To such people, we are all non-player characters. I've had people – vital people with crucial roles to play in a co-op mission – just leave the keyboard or joypad to go and watch TV or eat fish fingers, without a thought for the seven other players sitting in the back of the plane waiting to be skillfully flown over the dropzone. It's scary to think that there's a generation of kids for whom nobody else matters. Or at least there might be. I don't care about them enough to do any research into this.

And there are other little swines who set out to deliberately troll and mess up cooperative play, too. I was recently the victim of this while having a relaxing little game of online golf with someone in some far-flung country, or Bolton or somewhere. As I started to pull ahead on the leaderboard, I noticed that the other player was taking longer and longer to set up their shots. Because I'm genuinely not suspicious, I took this to mean that they were trying harder, and planning a heroic fightback. Nope – it turns out they were just eking the time out because it meant that I had to sit and wait. Eventually they realised that they would remain the active player if they were farther from the pin than me, so they took ages to chip the ball a few feet at a time. I watched this from a position of calmness, knowing that as you get older the perception of the time passes more quickly, so 20 minutes of this would have been far more painful for the troll, who was surely about five years old. And, of course, on the final hole they quit, depriving me of the win.

It's inevitable that people will troll or send abuse in any game where such a mechanic is supported. It just seems wrong to do it in an intense and rather emotionally harrowing game such as *Battlefield 1*. I mean, as a meat-grinder of a conflict, it was bad enough without name-calling and deliberate spoiling tactics. But if it is to happen, I say at least stick to insults that would have been current at the time. There's nothing wrong, if you see me slam my biplane into a hospital on my own side, with calling me a frightful buffoon. War might be hell, but we can at least be a bit nicer about it.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **box-kite-curve.com**

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